REIMAGINING DHARAVI RUTH HARRIS ON VIVEKANANDA NAYANJOT LAHIRI ON ASHOKA

JOHN KEAY ON THE MANASAROVAR MYSTERY THE FABULISM OF ANJOLIE ELA MENON

RAGE OF THE SPARE PRINCE

www.openthemagazine.com

OPEN

23 JANUARY 2023/ ₹60

RNI NO. DELENG/2009/27862
REGTD. NO DL (S)-17/3354/2021-23

2023: A SPACE ODYSSEY

OVER 100 STARTUPS ARE PUTTING INDIA ON THE ROAD TO BECOMING A MAJOR PLAYER IN THE GLOBAL SPACE ECONOMY

VISIT…

LANZAROTE
Caliente.com

New Delhi Institute of Management
1st & the Only Mentor B-School of India

New Delhi Institute of Management

Established in 1992 | Approved by AICTE since 1996 | Declared equivalent to MBA by AICTE and AIU (Association of Indian Universities) |
Accredited by NBA, Govt. of India, and Globally Accredited by ASIC, U.K. with "Premier College Status" |
(https://www.ndimdelhi.org/industry-interface/corporate-mentoring-programme/) (https://www.ndimdelhi.org/about-ndim/academic-advisory-council/)

Industry Led Tech Enabled 8 Dual MBA Specializations :
Finance, Marketing, HRM, Operations & SCM, AI-ML & Data-Science,
Digital Marketing, International Business, Treasury & Investment Management

Only Institute with a 'Japan Centre' and 'Korea Centre' preparing for Jobs with Japanese and Korean Companies | 400 hours of Corporate & Soft Skills Grooming | 12 month Mentoring by 354 corporate mentors |

Only B-school where "Incubation Centre" for promoting 'Entrepreneurship & Innovation' has been established by a premier Industry Chamber "ASSOCHAM" | India International Skill Centre" of NSDC, Govt of India | India Centre of QS ranked Asian Institute of Technology, Thailand (international university since 1959) for DBA Programs | Only Partner of Australian Risk Policy Institute in this part of the world | Faculty drawn from 33 International Universities who worked with 310 corporate houses | 133 recruiters & top academia guide & lead the curriculum and academics | Only B-school in North & Central India continuously chosen for 4 years by the AICTE for Smart India Hackathons, the biggest Digital & Entrepreneurial revolution of Government of India for 25000 startups | Only B-school listed in the "New Education Policy" of the Government of India along with IIM-A

Chief Guests at NDIM Convocations

BEST B-SCHOOL OF INDIA

for **'INDUSTRY LINKAGES'**
& under 19 AICTE notified employment related parameters
DECLARED BY AICTE & CII 3 YEARS IN A ROW,
BY ASSOCHAM 5 YEARS IN A ROW, AND ALSO BY FICCI

Chief Guests at NDIM Convocations

Recent Sessions at NDIM by Renowned Industry Stalwarts

100% Finest Placements and Internships for the last 5 years, even during the Covid years
50 (B&C), Tughlakabad Institutional Area, M.B. Road, New Delhi- 110062 |
011-40111000, Toll Free: 1800 419 0606 www.ndimdelhi.org info@ndimdelhi.org

For Admission Counselling Batch 2023-2025 :08882468367, 09910695359, 09654297211

CONTENTS

23 JANUARY 2023

5
LOCOMOTIF
Blame it on
the totem
By S Prasannarajan

6
OPEN DIARY
By Swapan Dasgupta

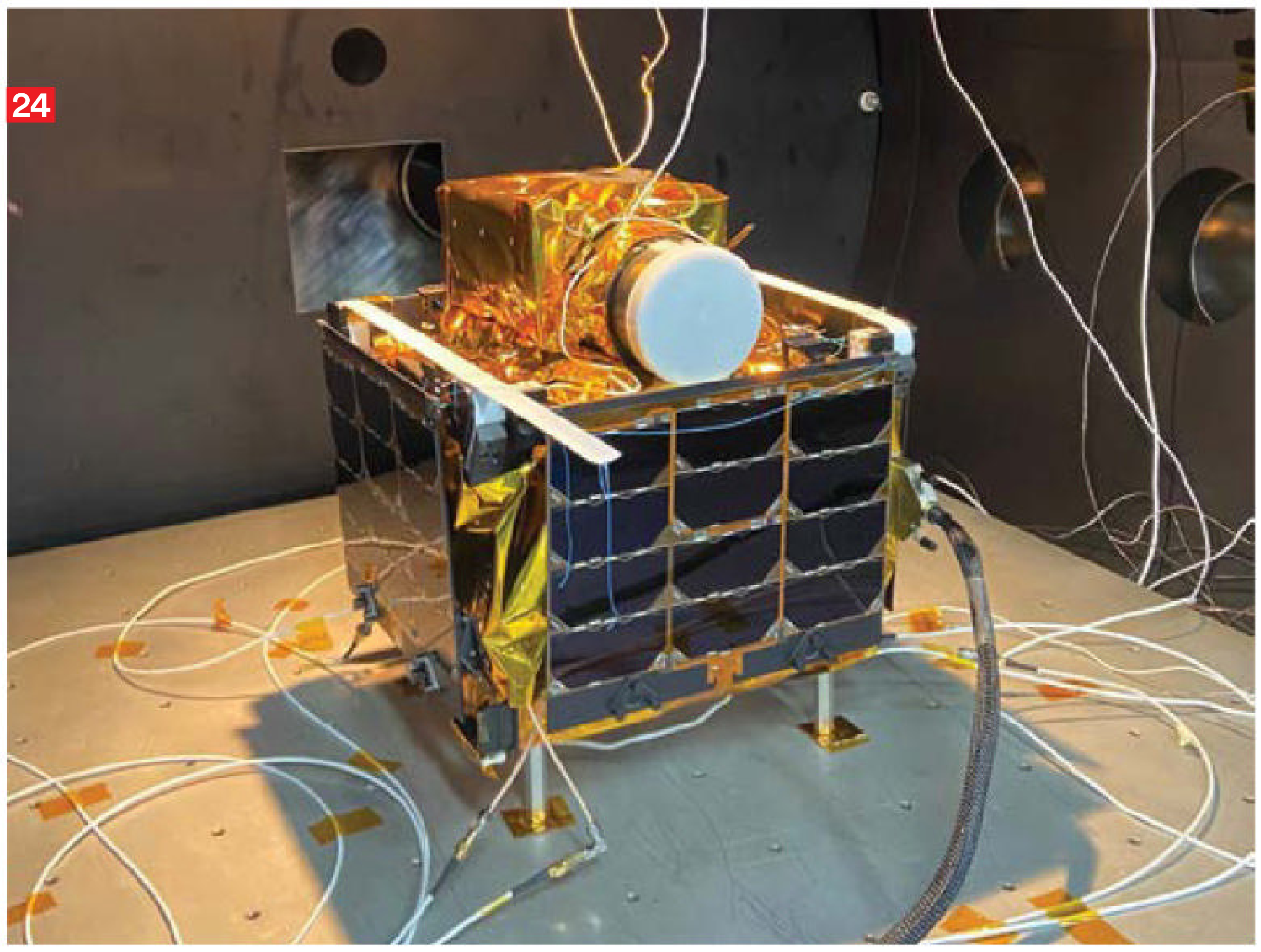
8
NOTEBOOK
All that went
wrong on 26/11
By Rajeev Deshpande

12
INDIAN ACCENTS
Invocation of
the incarnate
By Bibek Debroy

14
THE RACHEL PAPERS
The kings and queens
of Mumbai
By Rachel Dwyer

16
INSIDER

18
OPEN ESSAY
Sacred mystery
By John Keay


24

34

48

42

54

24 **2023 A SPACE ODYSSEY**
Over a hundred startups are putting India
on the road to becoming a major player
in the global space economy
By V Shoba

30 **'SPACE TECH WILL BE THE BACKBONE OF DIGITAL 5G'**
Interview with Jitendra Singh, Union Minister
of State (Independent Charge) for Science
and Technology
By V Shoba

34 **REIMAGINING DHARAVI**
After multiple failed attempts, the redevelopment
of Asia's largest slum is underway
By Lhendup G Bhutia

42 **THE RAGE OF THE SPARE**
The misery memoir of a lost prince
By Roderick Matthews

48 **OPEN CONVERSATION WITH RUTH HARRIS**
'Vivekananda is unique because he
globalises Hinduism'
By Keerthik Sasidharan

54
PRIMA DONNA OF FABULISM
Anjolie Ela Menon
continues to enhance the
aesthetics of mythology
By Noor Anand Chawla

58
ON THE ASHOKA TRAIL
Nayanjot Lahiri travels
through Asia to explore the
different images of the
Mauryan emperor
By Ullekh NP

61
**SALUTING
THE FOOT SOLDIERS**
The freedom movement's
nameless legion
By Rajshree Chandra

62
A NEW REEL
As the structure of state
support for films gets
dismantled, the industry
stands divided
By Kaveree Bamzai

65
**STREAMING
SMART**

66
STARGAZER
By Kaveree Bamzai

Cover by Saurabh Singh

Disclaimer 'Open Avenues' are advertiser-driven marketing initiatives and *Open* assumes no responsibility for content and the consequences of using products or services advertised in the magazine

EDITOR S Prasannarajan
MANAGING EDITOR PR Ramesh
CONSULTING EDITOR-AT-LARGE
Rajeev Deshpande
EXECUTIVE EDITOR Ullekh NP
EDITOR-AT-LARGE Siddharth Singh
DEPUTY EDITORS Madhavankutty Pillai
(Mumbai Bureau Chief),
Rahul Pandita, Amita Shah,
V Shoba (Bangalore), Nandini Nair,
Sudeep Paul
ART DIRECTOR Jyoti K Singh
SENIOR EDITORS Lhendup Gyatso Bhutia
(Mumbai), Moinak Mitra
SENIOR ASSOCIATE EDITOR
Antara Raghavan
ASSOCIATE EDITOR Vijay K Soni (Web)
ASSISTANT EDITOR Malika Halder
CHIEF OF GRAPHICS Saurabh Singh
SENIOR DESIGNERS Anup Banerjee,
Veer Pal Singh
PHOTO EDITOR Raul Irani
DEPUTY PHOTO EDITOR Ashish Sharma

BUSINESS HEAD Arun Singh
CFO & HEAD–IT Anil Bisht
NATIONAL HEAD-ADVERTISING
Swastik Banerjee
NATIONAL HEAD–EDUCATION
Virender Singh Bhati
GENERAL MANAGER–EVENTS INITIATIVES
Ashutosh Pratap Singh
GENERAL MANAGER
Uma Srinivasan (Chennai)
Jyoti Handa (West)

NATIONAL HEAD -CIRCULATION
Dhanpreet
Amol Joshi (West & East)
Ranjeet Kumar Yadav (North)
N Kishore Kumar (South)

HEAD–PRODUCTION Maneesh Tyagi
HEAD DESIGN–ADVERTISING Liju Varghese

All rights reserved throughout the world.
Reproduction in any manner is prohibited.

Printed and published by Arun Singh on behalf of the owner, Open Media Network Pvt Ltd Printed at Thomson Press India Ltd, 18-35 Milestone, Delhi Mathura Road, Faridabad-121007 (Haryana) and Published from 1st Floor, Tower 3A, DLF Corporate Park, DLF City, Phase-III, MG Road, Gurugram, Haryana - 122002.
Editor: S Prasannarajan

To subscribe, WhatsApp 'openmag' to 9999800012 or log on to www.openthemagazine.com
or call on our Landline no.: (0124) 4561900
or email at:
customercare@openmedianetwork.in
For alliances, email
alliances@openmedianetwork.in
For advertising, email
advt@openmedianetwork.in
For any other queries/observations,
email feedback@openmedianetwork.in

Ph: (0124) 4561900

Volume 15 Issue 3
For the week 17-23 January, 2023
Total no of pages 68

OPEN MAIL

editor@openmedianetwork.in

LETTER OF THE WEEK

Since the demonetisation exercise was aimed at countering fake currency and black money, there is no doubt that the entire process was correct ('Slaying an Old Demon' January 16, 2023). Even though the court's judgment is only of academic interest, it jolted the anti-demonetisation lobby in the new year. Despite a lone dissent, the majority on the five-judge Bench validated the November 8, 2016 demonetisation move by saying demonetisation was not flawed and satisfied the test of proportionality, thereby affirming there was reasonable nexus between objectives and the means to achieve it. By and large, the verdict clearly underlines the fact that secrecy and speed were a must for the demonetisation exercise to be successful. Not carrying it out through legislation, as was done when demonetisation took place earlier in 1946 and 1978, does not mean the Centre had no power to do so through ordinance. All in all, the 4:1 verdict could be termed historic because the exercise was thoughtful and well-intentioned. It was not illegal. Demonetisation had targeted multiple evils, although there were hardships faced by the public when it was implemented. At times, it is necessary for individual interest to yield to larger national interests.

KR Srinivasan

MODI WINS AGAIN

All said and done, the magical wave of Prime Minister Narendra Modi continues to manage and achieve momentous wins ('A Home Run for 2024', January 16, 2023). Despite winning for the seventh time in Gujarat, he showed his class and composure, including during his victory speech. Congress and the Aam Aadmi Party tried out time-tested methods but everything went awry for them. It is now proved beyond doubt that Gujarat is the enduring model for the Indian state and no one can come near such a stupendous performance. The voters showed faith and that was evident from the overwhelming win. This time there were no comments about EVMs and no complaints about rigging. It was a tremendous start and a prelude to the 2024 General Election.

CK Subramaniam

A MOTHER'S SACRIFICE

Heeraba Modi's death is a sad loss for the nation and a personal loss for Narendra Modi and his family ('The Mark of Motherhood', January 16, 2023). We all pray for Modi and that he is granted much needed strength in this time. Heeraben, or Heeraba as she was known to many, was a source of inspiration for the Modi family. The prime minister has stated that she made many sacrifices for her children. All those who knew her speak very well of her. Her neighbours said that Heeraben used to mingle with everyone and participate in all the festivals. Her years of struggle and what she achieved are symbolic of Indian ideals. Our condolences to the bereaved.

CK Ramanathan

WHAT TO READ AND WATCH THIS YEAR
Modi and Mother
OPEN
FORECAST
INDIA'S DIPLOMATIC TEST BY BRAHMA CHELLANEY • BJP'S HOME RUN FOR 2024
ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AT YOUR COMMAND • THE REWARDS OF ECONOMIC PRUDENCE

IRON RULE

It is always a shame when there is a blanket ban by any kind of government on rallies and protests ('We the People' by Makarand R Paranjape, December 15, 2022). Iran and China are two examples where dissenting voices are proscribed by morality policing and/or crushed by an iron hand. Iran seems to be following the example of Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia, and is preventing women from choosing their own lifestyle and dress, still living in the seventh century. China has oppressed its people, on the mainland and in Hong Kong and Taiwan. It is unfortunate that both Iran and China are doing such disservice to their own people.

Yusuf Shariff

By S PRASANNARAJAN

BLAME IT ON THE TOTEM

IT IS EASIER THAN ever to get afflicted by Democracy Derailed Syndrome. If you are still immune to the disillusionment that lies at the root of the affliction, you are likely to be accused of a cynic's nonchalance or a bigot's affiliation to an immoral political belief—and I'm not sure which is worse now as we are all ideologically indexed and arranged to suit the other's righteousness or rage. Losing faith in democracy is not an extreme form of withdrawal from political engagement any longer.

January 6 on Capitol Hill, Washington DC, marked the severest rupture in faith, for the Trump supporters' storming of the US Congress was more than an American transgression in democracy. It was the instinctive expression of a new kind of politics, more totemic than ideological, and Trump, the highest totem, was beyond the natural laws of democratic verdicts, beyond defeat; he was the permanent winner. Totemic leaders in politics cannot afford to be rejected or measured on a moral scale by the doubters. The storming of the Capitol was a last desperate surge for the totem shaken by democracy's judgment.

Two years on, with unintended commemorative rage, supporters of a defeated ultra-rightwing populist stormed the parliament, the supreme court and the presidential palace in Brazil. The aborted coup, January 6 rearmed, was, in most analysis, the new export of American values in democracy—or the universalisation of Trumpism. Jair Bolsonaro, the defeated president, was Trump reimagined by a Latin American fabulist—or so went the comparative studies in populist autocracy. As democracy became an item 'stolen' by the liberal establishment in the storytelling of the ultra-right, it also lost its credibility—and even useability—in the eyes of the morally disillusioned. DDS was inevitable.

DDS grew in parallel with the rise of the totemic leader, who was born in the wreckage of politics-as-usual with its rusty left-right division. While the left was fast losing its captive class, and the right its copyrights over conservative values (in society, economy and governance), the usurper was claiming the abandoned constituencies, and the 'centre' was certain to fall to his promise of a new deal. The totemic leader feasted on resentment, weaponised grievance, and monopolised the future.

He was there before a Trump or a Bolsonaro, in varying versions of the authoritarian deliverer-cum-über nationalist. But they flourished in stifled civil societies; institutions could only take the cue from their paranoia. They were genetically linked to their great-dictator predecessors but without their empires, imagined or real. The arrival of Trump, in the ultimate land of freedom and rights, was a new beginning, and nothing has been the same ever since.

In him merged all the traits of the totemic leader in a fully evolved democracy. The new party establishment, which itself is a repudiation of conventions and common decencies, is built on the leader's fears and fantasies. The system will always be obedient to the totemic leader. In the alternative reality of totemic democracy, loyalty is equality, rejection is assertion, and truth is a permanent dispute. Trump's Republican Party has dismantled the last vestiges of Reagan-Bush elitism and replaced intellectualism—bye bye neocons—with anti-factualism. Everyone beyond the fold was a suspect in the subterranean conspiracy against the new leader, the anti-leader. To lose an election is to be robbed by the conspirators. Trump thought so. Bolsonaro, too.

The Trump era intensified the debate about the unravelling of democracy and the unmaking of liberalism, and both verged on alarmism. The so-called populist, whether from the left or the right, is a master of the politics of inversion. The populist puts the base—the newly empowered drawn from both sides of the ideological divide—before the leaders. And he keeps the base intact by painting the present black and exaggerating the future. He bypasses institutions because nothing but his instinct is worthy of his trust. His rise, as told and retold by pundits, made the liberals redundant—and liberalism passive—and democracy as a system untenable.

Both prognoses are premature. The problem with liberalism—or the actually existing version of it—was, as the American thinker Mark Lilla argued, the liberals' tendency to mistake evangelism for action. The liberals began to enjoy the power of counterargument more than power itself. And of democracy, what we see today is not the unravelling but a reminder of its tenacity and elasticity. In its journey, it has survived many totems in various political cultures, and every time sending Cassandras into a paroxysm of dread. The perversions and pathologies of totemic leaders continue to be misread as exhaustion of democracy itself. The Bolsonaro story ends with the eventual irrelevance of Bolsonaro; it doesn't influence the future course of democracy.

That said, totems persist in democracy because they are the harvesters of popular impatience. No system other than democracy sustains the impatience—the original catalyst for change. ■

OPEN DIARY

Swapan Dasgupta

PUNE MAY WELL be India's eighth-largest metropolitan city, maybe the most significant of the non-state capital urban centres. It was initially on the radar of retired officers of the Army for its agreeable weather—a possible reason why it was the centre of Maratha power until the early 19th century. Today, apart from its pivotal role as a centre of automobile ancillaries, it has become yet another major centre of the country's IT sector.

Yet, quite paradoxically, it is history that has repeatedly brought me to Pune. In the late-1990s, when I was a journalist working for *India Today*, I came to a relatively sleepy town that reminded me of Mysore. The purpose was to hunt for the remaining family members of the small group of Hindu ultra-nationalists that were responsible for the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948. The unfortunate business that totally failed in its larger objectives was principally a Pune conspiracy and involved a clutch of educated Brahmins, blessed with an overdose of misplaced idealism. Meeting the family members of Nathuram Godse and Narayan Apte—the two conspirators who were given the death penalty—provided a vivid insight into a cloistered world of individuals left behind by history.

Last week, too, it was history that brought me back to Pune. This time, it was to participate in the book release of *The Mastery of Hindustan: Triumphs & Travails of Madhavrao Peshwa* by the Pune-based Uday Kulkarni. The study of Madhavrao Peshwa was the final volume of his Peshwa trilogy that included studies of Baji Rao and Nanasaheb Peshwa. In effect, Kulkarni has written a history of the Maratha confederacy at the peak of its power and influence. He has also written a separate book on the disastrous Third Battle of Panipat in 1761, when an over-confident Maratha army suffered a spectacular defeat at the hands of the Afghan Ahmad Shah Abdali. It was Madhavrao Peshwa who single-mindedly prevented the total collapse of Maratha power after Panipat, and patiently organised the restoration of the confederacy in both northern and southern India.

A study of the Peshwas is a monumental project. Unlike many aspects of modern Indian history that suffer from a paucity of archival material and other printed sources, Maratha history, from the advent of Shivaji to the surrender of Maratha sovereignty in 1802 by Baji Rao II, is blessed with an archival overload. Selections from the Peshwai Daftar records in Pune have even been published as multi-volume collections. Additionally, there are the records accumulated by the Bharat Itihas Sanshodhak Mandal. Combined with the records of Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan, the archives of the Nizam of Hyderabad, and, of course, the records maintained by the East India Company, almost every aspect of Maratha history can be documented and dissected.

It was the sheer range of documents that led to an entire generation of Indian historians producing seminal studies in both Marathi and English. The story of these pioneering historians—particularly the collaborative efforts of GS Sardesai and Sir Jadunath Sarkar—has been beautifully captured by TCA Raghavan, a former diplomat and historian, in *History Men: Jadunath Sarkar, G.S. Sardesai, Raghubir Sinh and Their Quest for India's Past* (2019).

What is both striking and intriguing is that after these pioneers and their immediate students made their contributions from the 1920s to the 1960s, there is a prolonged silence for nearly 50 years. Yes, there were important studies of different facets of Maratha history by historians based in universities overseas, but within India there was a period of prolonged inactivity. The extended silence and the overall dilution of interest in a well-documented phase in Indian history also coincided with the over-politicisation of history-writing from the 1970s. Was there a conscious attempt to shift the gaze of history departments from the pioneering works of Sarkar and others? Were priorities redefined to relegate archival-based research to the background and instead promote theoretical writing?

What I found significant is that the return of the Marathas to the centrestage of history-writing was the outcome of an individual initiative. Kulkarni was a surgeon in the Indian Army who took up history-writing after an early retirement. He has travelled in search of documents and paintings that are scattered all over the world. He has visited the forts and battlefields to understand battles better and he has taught himself the old Modi script that was used in official documents from the 17th to the mid-20th centuries. He has also written for a general readership. His narrative history is devoid of jargon.

Kulkarni has single-handedly rescued history from the abdication of responsibilities by professional historians. ■

OPEN
OPEN THE MOST SOUGHT AFTER WEEKLY MAGAZINE
SWISS MILITARY SLING BAG
WHAT CAN KHARGE DO? • BOOKER COMES TO SRI LANKA • PALLAVI AIYAR ON XI JINPING
OPEN
THE WEALTH ISSUE
My Magazine
English News & Education
Weekly
Read

SUBSCRIBE TO OPEN MAGAZINE & GET ASSURED FREE GIFT WORTH ₹2190

YES! Please start my subscription to OPEN magazine as per the offer chosen below:

Tick [✓]	Term	No of Issues	Cover Price (₹)	Offer Price (₹)	Discount (%)	Additional Benefits
☐	3 year	153	9,180	**6,430**	30	Swiss Military Sling Bag worth ₹2190 plus 3 year Digital Access BEST BUY
☐	2 Year	102	6,120	**4,890**	20	Swiss Military Sling Bag worth ₹2190 plus 2 year Digital Access
☐	1 Year	51	3,060	**2,750**	10	Swiss Military Sling Bag worth ₹2190 plus 1 year Digital Access

TO SUBSCRIBE

200+ Payment Options Accepted Here
Pay To
OPEN
Open Media Network Pvt Ltd
OR
Enter this URL in your Browser
http://payit.cc/QXIQ800
SCAN the QR Code using a QR code scanner App
Enter the amount to be paid & click on PAY
Payments Powered by CC Avenue

NAME (MR./MS./MRS.): ____________
DESIGNATION: ____________ OCCUPATION: ____________ INDUSTRY TYPE: ____________
ADDRESS: ____________
CITY: ____________ STATE: ____________ PIN (MANDATORY): ____________
MOBILE NO.: ____________ LANDLINE NO.: ____________ EMAIL ID: ____________

PAYMENT DETAILS

CHEQUE NO./DRAFT NO.: ____________ DATE: ____________ AMOUNT (IN ₹): ____________
PAYABLE TO "OPEN MEDIA NETWORK PRIVATE LIMITED"

MAIL THE SUBSCRIPTION FORM WITH YOUR CHEQUE/DD TO **OPEN MEDIA NETWORK PRIVATE LIMITED, 1ST FLOOR, TOWER 3A, DLF CORPORATE PARK, DLF PHASE 3, DLF CITY, GURUGRAM, HARYANA - 122002**

TERMS & CONDITIONS: • OPEN publishes 51 issues in a year • The cover price of weekly issue is ₹60 • Please allow 2-3 weeks for processing your subscription • OPEN subscription offer is a limited period offer and subject to change • Once the free gift has been dispatched, no cancellation request will be entertained • All disputes are subject to the exclusive jurisdiction of competent courts & forums in Delhi/New Delhi only.

TO SUBSCRIBE - WhatsApp 'openmag' to 9999800012 CS Direct line: 0124-4561900
Visit www.openthemagazine.com/subscribe Email: customercare@openmedianetwork.in

OPENINGS

NOTEBOOK

All That Went Wrong on 26/11

LATE ON THE EVENING of November 26, 2008, initial theories that the unfolding violence in Mumbai might be serial bombings like Delhi had witnessed some time earlier were given up. The news reaching the highest echelons of government in Delhi suggested that the shootings seemed more like gang warfare. As the night wore on, the Central government concluded that it was time to deploy the National Security Guard (NSG) who finally, four days later, rid Mumbai of the 10 Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) terrorists who had held the city, and indeed India, in their deadly thrall.

The tragedy and trauma of the 26/11 Mumbai attacks might have faded but the terrorist assault left scars that remain unhealed. In his book, *As Good as My Word* (HarperCollins) former Cabinet Secretary KM Chandrasekhar provides a detailed account of the Mumbai attacks and points to the serious weaknesses of a security establishment that answered to different masters, preventing a coherent response. "The 26/11 attacks also exposed weakness at the highest level in decision-making in a grave emergency," Chandrasekhar notes. While the creation of the post of National Security Advisor (NSA) was a step in the right direction, responsibilities and power were distributed between the NSA and the Cabinet Secretariat. There was also the Union Ministry of Home Affairs dealing with internal security (including the Intelligence Bureau) while the finance ministry looked at enforcement in financial areas. The Cabinet Secretariat was concerned with the administrative matters of the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) but no operational details were shared with India's top civil servant.

Similarly, the Special Protection Group, looking after the security of select VVIPs, nominally reported to the Cabinet Secretariat and besides all these organisations there was military intelligence which, according to Chandrasekhar, was more or less an independent outfit. "There was no real coordination mechanism in place," he writes. The mandate of the National Crisis Management Committee was limited to natural calamities. A committee of secretaries set up after the Kandahar hijack was limited to such events. "When a real crisis blew on 26/11, therefore, there was no real clarity on who was to do what at the central level… I waded into the crisis and its handling as is my wont but I had no background intelligence, no intelligence inputs, not even full knowledge of what was actually happening in Mumbai until late in the night. I had no knowledge about the dimensions of the crisis and the capacity of the state government to handle the crisis on its own either, as normally happens in all such events," Chandrasekhar has written, plainly detailing a dire situation.

In a long and distinguished career, Chandrasekhar was Cabinet Secretary for four years before he retired from the Central government in 2011. In this capacity and other senior positions he held prior to becoming Cabinet Secretary, Chandrasekhar offers an insider's view of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government headed by Manmohan Singh. While he defends the government on scams like 2G and 'coalgate', his account of the terror strike on Mumbai is most revealing. Though the complete sense of surprise achieved by the attackers and the confusion that followed have been written about, Chandrasekhar's account—and, importantly, post-facto analysis—carries weight given that he was in the thick of the action. He notes that after the crisis ended, a senior minister told him that he would need to conduct an inquiry into what went wrong and who was responsible. This never happened. Shivraj Patil, who was Union home minister at the time, and who made news for his sartorial makeovers during a visit to terror-hit Mumbai, was the only one to pay the price and was replaced by P Chidambaram. NSA MK Narayanan, an appointment backed by Congress leader Sonia Gandhi, continued in office before he was eventually appointed governor of West Bengal.

Chandrasekhar also deals with reports that information about a possible terror attack was ignored. There were claims of RAW intercepting an LeT conversation about an attack on a sea-front hotel in India. Taj Gateway, Taj Lands End, Marriott and Sea Rock were mentioned as likely targets. He

> **KM Chandrasekhar offers an insider's view of the UPA government headed by Manmohan Singh. He recalls that various bits of information were not put together on time and this pointed to serious gaps in intelligence systems. He notes that later revelations about David Headley show how porous India's security was**

The Taj Mahal Hotel under attack, November 29, 2008

REUTERS

KM Chandrasekhar

writes that the authenticity of the information could not be vouched for as it was never conveyed to him before or after the event. In any case, no inquiry was held to evaluate if there was failure to act on time on available information. While much of this is speculation, there is some certainty about a RAW alert about a small ship or dhow in the Arabian Sea headed for Mumbai with a deadly cargo on board. Chandrasekhar mentions this and the input, more than other more fanciful accounts, might have been the nearest thing to a real-time warning for Indian agencies. Chandrasekhar recalls that various bits of information were not put together on time and this pointed to serious gaps in intelligence systems. He correctly notes that later revelations about David Headley, a Pakistani-American, making several visits to Mumbai between 2002 and 2009 to scope the targets, show how porous India's security was. To cap it all, Headley was not just working for Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI); he was also a double agent for the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). When Indian agencies finally gained access to Headley in a US jail, he shared copious information about the plot and later testified through video before a Mumbai special court. He told the court that LeT chief Hafiz Saeed and 26/11 "operations commander" Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi were certain they would face only perfunctory action for the attack. Given the role of ISI in the terror attack, this was hardly a surprise.

Chandrasekhar dwells briefly on why the Manmohan Singh government did not opt for a military retaliation against Pakistan. He says then Foreign Secretary and later NSA Shivshankar Menon met him and spoke of such a course of action. As has been reported earlier, then Air Force Chief Fali Major was ready to carry out strikes on Pakistan. Menon himself has later written that not using armed force was the right decision at the time. Chandrasekhar readily confesses that such decisions were above his pay grade but concurs that restraint was the better option even as India launched a major diplomatic offensive against Pakistan. The UPA government's decision will continue to be debated and the military resources, particularly as regards the Army, available at the time are important considerations. But officials who worked with Manmohan Singh point out that he was never inclined to consider such action. During his prime ministership, Singh found grappling with security and defence matters not quite his cup of tea. His key miscalculation in engaging with Pakistan was to believe that shared economic interests and people-to-people contacts would dilute hostility between the two nations. He failed to recognise the essential DNA of the Pakistani military and state.

His early experience as a young administrator in Kerala helped Chandrasekhar learn how to deal with politics and decision-making. He showed the acumen to lead government-owned businesses and even turn a profit. In his office in the Rashtrapati Bhavan complex, Chandrasekhar came across as an affable version of the permanent secretary (later, Cabinet Secretary) in the popular BBC series *Yes Minister*. A man of unwavering integrity, his instinct was to help people and back the right causes while navigating the pulls and pressures of a coalition government. ■

By RAJEEV DESHPANDE

PORTRAIT • MM KEERAVANI

THE RHYTHM YOGI

A well-deserved global award after a lifetime of composing music

A FOLK BEAT WITH classical ragas and Western instrumentation, picturised on two stars engaged in a robust dance-off against an Englishman, while an Englishwoman cheers them on. Much like the cricket match in *Lagaan* in 2001, *RRR* makes the two heroes, dressed like Englishmen, tap dance like Gene Kelly with an energy and enthusiasm all their own. It is an iconic, anti-imperialist moment in world cinema and it is little wonder that '*Naatu Naatu*' conquered the hearts of the Hollywood Foreign Press Association and won a Golden Globe for Best Original Song.

No surprise also that the music director behind the song, the low key MM Keeravani had a long list of people to thank for the song, among them the choreographer Prem Rakshit and lyricist Chandrabose.

Keeravani knows exactly how important the words and images are for a song. His breakout song is from *Kshana Kshanam*, (1991), directed by Ram Gopal Varma, where '*Jaamu Raathiri*' recreated the sounds of a forest at nighttime and featured a young Venkatesh and Sridevi. With its haunting sound, '*Jaamu Raathiri*' takes you right into a forest with a coy Sridevi being serenaded by a confident Venkatesh. '*Telusa Manasa*' from *Criminal* (1994), was sung sensuously by SP Balasubrahmanyam and picturised on a honeymooning couple Nagarjuna and Manisha Koirala. '*Tum Mile Dil Khile*,' the Hindi version sung by Kumar Sanu, made him popular in Mumbai as well. '*Jaadu hai Nasha hai*,' sung by Shreya Ghoshal, for Amit Saxena's *Jism*, (2003), featuring a seductive Bipasha Basu and a mostly open-mouthed John Abraham, was equally well received.

Keeravani, who calls himself MM Kreem in Mumbai cinema and Maragathamani in Tamil and Mayalayam cinema, knows a song is a collaborative exercise. For '*Naatu Naatu*' says Kasturi Muralikrishna, writer and editor of *Sanchika*, a Telugu web magazine, it took 19 months for Chandrabose to come up with the perfect lyrics. Indeed, 'dance as if you've eaten green chillies/dance like a sharp knife', couldn't be a more accurate description of the way Junior NTR and Ram Charan move in the song. Keeravani was tough on himself, composing 30 tunes before settling on '*Naatu Naatu*'.

Photos GETTY IMAGES

Keeravani is deeply spiritual. He has lived like a sanyasi for a year to avoid a premature death, which was predicted, gives large part of his earnings to charity, and is fiercely loyal to his family. SS Rajamouli is a cousin and works only with Keeravani. The Golden Globe is a result not only of his hard work over the years but also his consistency and resilience. As Muralikrishna says: "He doesn't have Illyaraja's arrogant creativity, Devi Sri Prasad's showmanship or AR Rahman's technological wizardry, but he is humble, creates tunes till the producer is satisfied, and is amenable to suggestions from singers too. His songs are not showy but enduring and melodious." He is a fan of music director RD Burman and novelist Stephen King.

Tanuja Chandra who worked with him in her movie *Sur* says he has composed beautiful song upon beautiful song for decades. "I'm so glad the global spotlight is on him now and will lead people to the sublime music he has created. I remember with such affection that the day the album of *Sur*, my 2002 movie, released, the music company called and told us that the songs were loved. He's a magnificent artist and a wonderful human being. I'm thrilled for him."

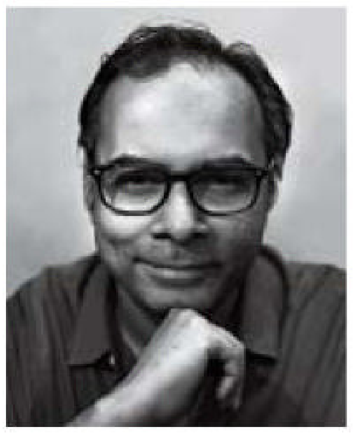
Indeed praise for the man is almost as universal as plaudits for the musician. He is described by friends as quiet and reticent in formal company but quite talkative among friends and family. He's often given to breaking into song as well. He doesn't drink, lives a quiet life, and likes to sidestep controversy. A trained violinist, he loves the harmonium.

In many ways, The Golden Globes bestowed belated recognition to many stars who have diligently worked in their own lanes, whether it was American comedic genius Jennifer Coolidge, 61, or Malaysian action star Michelle Yeoh, 60. The Best Original Song award will give wings to Keeravani, 61, while proving that staying close to your roots and being authentic to your art can pay off in the long run. One just needs to stay the course. ■

By KAVEREE BAMZAI

ANGLE

THE TRAGEDY OF HOCKEY



On the muted enthusiasm before the World Cup in India

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

ON THURSDAY, FORMER Indian hockey captain Viren Rasquinha tweeted about how the media was cold shouldering the Hockey World Championship that was about to begin the next day in Odisha. He wrote: ‘Extremely disappointed with mainstream media & top Indian newspapers on lack of Hockey coverage. Hockey World Cup starts tomorrow. India is hosting it. Been barely any articles even on our own players. We have brilliant hockey journalists. Give them some space please!!!’ How far the fortunes of hockey have fallen in the country that calls it its national sport is all the more striking when compared to the frenzy that the recently concluded Football World Cup had evoked. That was being held in another country without India even participating, also telling you it can’t just be the obsession with cricket to blame for hockey’s decline.

Cricket firmly triumphed over hockey in the 1980s and it is interesting to imagine what would have happened if the face-off between the two had happened today. Because cricket could only be picked up so obsessively by a country where a mostly poor and underemployed people had a lot of time on their hands to spend a whole day or five days following a game. In post-liberalisation India today, with the youth mostly employed, it might not have had that many takers (of course in the thought experiment T20 would still not be there). But hockey, even though it is tailored for brevity, might still not have taken the place of cricket. One reason for that is that we stopped being world champions and as the Europeans and Australians took over, India wasn’t even one of those among the top. Victory is a necessary condition for a sport’s popularity. Cricket’s success was also because it got great administrators over the last few decades, while the state of hockey was a mess.

There used to be a time when hockey had superstars whose appeal went beyond only those who followed the game. But without winning international tournaments, there were no such personalities. Every school kid with a bat wanted to be Sachin Tendulkar but where were the Dhyan Chands? The circle became vicious. Without mass appeal, there is no big ticket money. Without the money, there is no expansion of infrastructure and without that the numbers who play the game become lesser. And if people don’t play, then the sport begins to fade from the minds of even those who don’t play. It is difficult to find hockey on the streets of Mumbai anymore, a fairly common sight some decades ago. Rasquinha’s tweet is targeted at the media but the lack of coverage is merely the symptom. It only reflects what newspapers or television channels perceive as lack of interest among their viewers.

It is hard to see how any of this will change. Hosting the World Cup is not necessarily the ticket for it. Winning it might however light a spark. But for it to catch a fire is a long way off. Hockey’s decline was spread over decades and any revival too, if at all, will be equally drawn out. ■

IDEAS

BANKRUPTCY

Human beings can go bankrupt. So can nations, as Pakistan is about to. And the reasons are the same—spending money you don’t have by borrowing until you have no money to even pay the interest on your loans. And just like humans, nations too try to dig their way out of the hole by taking loans to repay loans until it becomes increasingly difficult to find any new lenders. Nations have a bigger rope to that extent but Pakistan seems to be at the end of it now. It might still find some temporary saviour but meanwhile with foreign exchange reserves only there for three months of import, the agony of the Pakistani people is going to increase exponentially. ■

WORD’S WORTH

‘Even if the government spends itself into bankruptcy and the economy still does not recover, Keynesians can always say that it would have worked if only the government had spent more’

THOMAS SOWELL
AMERICAN ECONOMIST

Invocation of the Incarnate

Why certain forms of worship work better than others

EARLIER, I SAID that Shiva's *avataras* are not as familiar as Vishnu's *avataras*. In the conversation between Krishna and Upamanyu, Krishna asked Shiva about these.

Upamanyu replied, "In Varaha *kalpa*, in the seventh *manvantara*, following the due order of *yugas*, these are the following twenty-eight (one for each *dvapara yuga*) — Shveta, Sutara, Madana, Suhotra, Kanka, Lougakshi, Mahamaya, Jaigishivya, Dadhivaha, Rishabha, the sage Ugra, Atri, Supalaka, Goutama, the sage Vedashira, Gokarna, Shikhandi, who lived in a cave, Jatamali, Attahasa, Daruka, Languli, Mahakala, Shuli, Dandi, Mundisha, Vishnu, Somasharma and Lakulishvara. Each of them had four *shishyas* who were serene in their minds. Starting with Shveta and ending with Rushya, I will enumerate them in the proper order. (1) Shveta; (2) Shvetashikha; (3) Shvetashva; (4) Shvetalohita; (5) Dundubhi; (6) Shatarupa; (7) Richika; (8) Ketuman; (9) Vikosha; (10) Vikesha; (11) Vipasha; (12) Pashanashana; (13) Sumukha; (14) Durmukha; (15) Durgama; (16) Duratikrama; (17) Sanatkumara; (18) Sanaka; (19) Sananda; (20) Sanatana: (21) Sudhama; (22) Viraja; (23) Shankha; (24) Andaja; (25) Sarasvata; (26) Megha; (27) Meghavaha; (28) Suvahaka; (29) Kapila; (30) Asuri; (31) Panchashikha; (32) Vashkala; (33) Parashara; (34) Garga; (35) Bhargava; (36) Angiras; (37) Bala; (38) Bandhu; (39) Niramitra; (40) Ketushringa; (41) Tapodhana; (42) Lambodara; (43) Lamba; (44) Lambatma; (45) Lambakeshaka; (46) Sarvajna; (47) Samabuddhi; (48) Sadhya; (49) Siddhi; (50) Sudhama; (51) Kashyapa; (52) Vasishtha, (53) Viraja; (54) Atri; (55) Ugra, (56) Gurushreshtha; (57) Shravana; (58) Shravishtaka; (59) Kuni; (60) Kunibahu; (61) Kusharira; (62) Kunetraka; (63) Kasyapa; (64) Ushanas; (65) Chyavana; (66) Brihaspati; (67) Utathya; (68) Vamadeva; (69) Mahakala; (70) Mahanila; (71) Vachahshrava; (72) Suvira; (73) Shyavaka; (74) Yatishvara; (75) Hiranyanabha; (76) Koushalya; (77) Lokakshi; (78) Kuthumi; (79) Sumantu; (80) Jaimini; (81) Kubandha; (82) Kushakandhara; (83) Plaksha; (84) Darbhayani; (85) Ketuman; (86) Goutama; (87) Bhallavi; (88) Madhu; (89) Pinga; (90) Shvetaketu; (91) Ushija; (92) Brihadashva; (93) Devala; (94) Kavi; (95) Shalihotra; (96) Suvesha; (97) Yuvanashva; (98) Sharadvasu: (99) Akshapada; (100) Kanada; (101) Uluka; (102) Vatsa; (10) Kulika; (104) Garga; (105) Mitraka; and (106) Rushya. These were the *shishyas* of Mahesha, when he assumed the form of Yogacharya."

(To make it clear, Shveta, Shvetashikha, Shvetashva and Shvetalohita were *shishyas* of Yogacharya Shveta and so on. Naturally, there was more than one person with the same name. There should be 112 names for *shishyas*, but we only have 106, suggesting one *shloka* is missing from the text.)

"All of them were *siddhas* in the Pashupata vow and all of them smeared their bodies with *bhasma*. They knew the truths of all the sacred texts and were accomplished in the Vedas and Vedangas. All of them were devoted to *jnana* about Shiva and followed Shiva's order. With their minds devoted to Shiva, all of them were free of attachment. They were patient and tolerated all the opposite pairs of sentiments. They were engaged in the welfare of all beings. They were upright, mild and healthy, conquering their rage and their senses. All of them wore strings of *rudraksha* beads as ornaments and had Tripundra marks on their foreheads. Some had tufts of matted hair, others matted hair everywhere. Some were without matted hair and shaved their heads. They generally ate roots and fruits and were devoted to *pranayama*. They were proud about Shiva and devoted to performing *dhyana* on Shiva. Destroying the sprouts of the poisonous tree of *samsara*, they readied themselves to proceed to Shiva's supreme city. If a person accepts them as virtuous and constantly worships Shiva, he proceeds to *sayujya* with Shiva."

Krishna said, "O illustrious one! O ocean of every kind of *jnana*! O guru! You are actually Parameshvara, in the form of a *maharishi*, having taken an *avatara* to sever the bonds of men. Other than you, there is no one in this universe, deva or *danava*, who possesses such supreme sentiments and knows the truth about Shiva. It is as if the wielder of Pinaka is directly emerging from your mouth. Having drunk the *amrita* of *jnana* about Shiva, my mind is not satisfied. He is the creator of the entire universe. Seated on the lap of Bhagavan, her husband, what did Parameshvari ask him?"

Upamanyu replied, "O Krishna! You have asked an appropriate question and I will answer accurately. You possess an auspicious mind and are Bhava's devotee. Immersed in divine *dhyana*, along with Devi, Mahadeva went to the divine and supreme mountain of Mandara, where there were beautiful caves. Devi's beloved friend was Shubhavati, with a pleasant smile. She affectionately brought agreeable and blossoming flowers. Deva, supreme among devas, placed Devi on his own lap and ornamented her with those flowers and became full of joy. The ladies from the inner quarters and Indras among *ganas*, who served in the inner quarters, decorated Devi, the Ishvari of all the worlds, with divine ornaments. With whisks in their hands, they served Devi and Deva Maheshvara, her husband, who is the lord of all the worlds. Mahesha and Maheshi engaged in agreeable conversations, to save men in the world and those who seek refuge with Shiva. Finding an appropriate moment, Maheshvari of all the worlds asked her husband, Maheshvara of all the worlds. Devi asked, "Mortals are foolish in their intelligence. How can they bring Mahadeva under their control? They are incapable of controlling their *atmans* and have not cleansed their *atmans*.'"

Illustration by **SAURABH SINGH**

IF MEN HAVE FAITH IN ISHVARA, HE CAN BE SEEN IF A PERSON DESIRES TO BRING HIM UNDER CONTROL, HE CAN ACCOMPLISH IT THROUGH DEVOTION

Ishvara replied, "If there is no devotion, I cannot be brought under control through karma, austerities, *japa*, postures, *jnana*, or other means. Whatever be the cause, if men have faith in me, I can be brought under control, touched, seen, worshipped and spoken to. If a person desires to bring me under control, he can accomplish it through devotion. *Shraddha* leads to the dharma of the respective *varnas* and protects it. If a human follows the dharma of his *varna* and ashrama, that develops faith in me, not anything else. Every kind of *siddhi* can be accomplished through the dharma of the ashramas. Following my command, Brahma stated this earlier. With many kinds of rites, this is known as the grandfather's dharma. This is expensive, requires efforts and does not lead to great fruits. However, through the great dharma of devotion, one can obtain what is difficult to get. All the *varnas* can obtain this by seeking refuge with me alone. Through this happy path, they obtain dharma, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha*. I have again reorganised the conduct of the *varnas* and *ashramas* and have said that all the *varnas* must have devotion towards me. I have instructed that only those who have faith in me are entitled to observe the rites, not others. I have instructed and described the path of seeking refuge in me. Through my favours, a person is then freed of impurities, *maya* and Pashas. He is able to reach my city, from which, a return (as in rebirth) is extremely difficult. This is my supreme dharma and having obtained me, they are freed from *maya*. Whether one follows, or does not follow, the dharma of the *varnas*, if a person follows what I have said about devotion and seeking refuge in me, he raises himself up. He gets what is difficult to obtain, possessing more than crores and crores of qualities. This is greater than what is obtained by following the dharma of *varnas*. O auspicious one! In all the *manvantaras* that have passed, spanning thousands of generations, I have had *avataras* as Yogacharyas. O Sureshvari! However, those who do not possess intelligence and those who are not my devotees, find it extremely difficult to access this *vijnana* of generations. Therefore, one should make efforts to resort to devotion. If a person makes efforts elsewhere, there is great harm. There is a great weakness, delusion, blindness and dumbness. If a person acts in that way, he is expelled from the path of liberation."

"O Sureshvari! My eternal dharma has four parts—*jnana*, *kriya*, *charya* and yoga. (*Charya* is conduct, interpreted as daily worship. These are the four parts of *sadhana* followed by a *bhakta*. *Charya* leads to *salokya*, *kriya* leads to *samipya*, yoga leads to *sarupya* and *jnana* leads to *sayujya*. I have explained these terms in earlier columns.) *Jnana* is said to be knowledge about Pashu, Pasha and Pati. Under the instruction of a guru, following the six paths for purification is said to be *kriya*. I have laid down the rules for the *varnas* and *ashramas*, and within that, the dharma of good conduct through worship. This is described as *charya*. If a person follows the path indicated by me, immersing his mind in me and restraining any other kind of conduct, this is described as yoga. O Devi! Purifying the consciousness is superior to many horse sacrifices. It bestows emancipation, something that is difficult for those who are attached to material objects to obtain. Yoga is said to be non-attachment and destruction of former sins, by conquering the category of senses through *yama* and *niyama*. *Jnana* results from non-attachment and yoga follows from *jnana*. There is no doubt that a person who knows yoga, even if he has fallen, is emancipated. The following activities must always be practiced—compassion, non-violence, accumulation of *jnana*, truthfulness, avoidance of theft, belief, faith, restraint of the senses, studying, teaching, performing sacrifices for one's own self, performing sacrifices for others, *dhyana* devotion towards Ishvara, constant pursuit of *jnana* and good conduct." ■

The Kings and Queens of Mumbai

Will Hindi films return to form this year?

AS THE NEW YEAR begins, I wonder why I didn't watch as many Hindi films as usual last year. Is it all part of getting ever older? A few films drew me in without my loving them; so *Jayeshbhai Jordaar* did because it was Ranveer Singh in Gujarat and he held together a sometimes inchoate film through his stardom and charm, just as SRK could; or *Qala*, whose beautiful form showed dark deeds in the film world of Calcutta (Kolkata) in the early days of playback singing.

However, I also enjoyed many series, my favourite from India being *Panchayat* – a universal comedy of people pursuing their own interests in ways which don't match with audience perceptions; the outstanding-as-always Shefali Shah and other great actors in *Delhi Crime*; Sima Aunty (more of the fabulous 'Face Reader' please) in *Indian Matchmaking*, which is hilarious in so many ways; and the sometimes baffling *Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives*, where I want to see more of Gauri Khan and Karan Johar styling people and their houses.

I began to feel a little more familiar with films from the southern film industries. After starting last year on several Malayalam films, mostly starring Fahadh Faasil, who seemed like an old friend when he appeared in the Telugu *Pushpa: The Rise* (2021), as did Samantha Ruth Prabhu whom I'd first seen in the (Hindi) series *The Family Man*. Meanwhile SS Rajamouli seems to be heading to the Oscars with *RRR*. The spectacle was breathtaking and '*Naatu Naatu*' was unmissable. It's a shame the Brits seemed to be 'am dram' (amateur dramatics) rather than foils for the heroes, but I was thrilled to see NTR's grandson and Chiranjeevi's son together on screen. *Kantara* was set among the forest dwellers of coastal Karnataka (hence perhaps the elephant shortage), and I would have liked less roaring and more dancing.

I usually choose my Hindi films because they have stars I want to see, or they are made by directors I'm interested in or I read reviews that intrigue me. *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022) was therefore unmissable because of Alia Bhatt, and Sanjay Leela Bhansali setting the film in historic Bombay (Mumbai).

The film was exquisite although the difference in appearance between the real Gangubai (written about in S Hussain Zaidi's *Mafia Queens of Mumbai*) and the delicate beauty of Alia Bhatt was much commented on. Alia gave a stunning performance as always. Any film about historical Bombay (Mumbai) is going to pull me in, and I wasn't disappointed in the recreation of Falkland Road as an art deco city whereas today the beauty of the city seems to be vanishing before my eyes. Bhansali created a city of dreams, with movie halls showing Hindi films, and women campaigning for the education of girls.

As in most of Bhansali's films, love is difficult. Love is easy to find but it vanishes like the morning dew, as lovers are almost certainly doomed to suffer exquisite pain. Love is foregrounded so while sexual attraction is present, here it is mostly hidden from the viewer, even in a film about a woman who is a sex worker and a madam.

Some critics find Bhansali's films beautiful but 'bloodless' as passion is expressed aesthetically and bodies are beautiful, smooth, perfumed (I am sure) and far removed from the grimy sweaty business of life in the city. Even the colours of the city are refined and Gangubai stands apart from the city in her white sari, sunglasses hiding her eyes, reminding me of many of the great stars of Hindi cinema, perhaps most of all Nargis and Rekha. In Bhansali's films, suffering becomes beautiful, an exquisite torture, framing tears and sorrow. Gangubai rages—she hits, she struggles—but her biggest fights are won by presenting herself so beautifully, while using words as weapons.

I was a little unsure how to understand Bhansali's vision of Gangubai but I was lucky to be Sanjay Leela Bhansali's interlocutor in a masterclass he was invited to deliver at BAFTA in November. Bhansali engaged the whole audience as he expressed his love for Indian cinema in highly articulate and carefully considered ways, explaining how he creates his own films aware of their role in the history of Indian cinema, foregrounding his love and understanding of Indian aesthetics.

I've watched all of Bhansali's films as they released, from *Khamoshi: The Musical* onwards. I was not a fan of his *Devdas* (2002) the first time I saw it in a movie hall in Mumbai, as for me Devdas was defined by Bimal Roy's 1955 film. This was always my opening film on the courses I used to teach on Indian cinema. Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's story—which students loved (poor Devdas) or didn't enjoy (he didn't help himself)—and a dream team of Bimal Roy, Dilip Kumar, Suchitra Sen, Vyjayanthimala, Motilal, SD Burman, Sahir Ludhianvi, Lata Mangeshkar, Talat Mahmood, Manna Dey and Geeta Dutt make this one of my all-time favourites.

The black-and-white film is simple and has many realist elements as the two who were destined for each other spoil their fate. The songs are so lovely and restrained. Paro only sings one song, '*O albele panchhi*', where she and Devdas as children sing for the first and last time in harmony, until their final meeting of souls. The Bauls sing of her sorrow, as Radha who knows Krishna and she cannot be married, while Devdas has the heartbreaking '*Mitwa lagi re yeh kaisi*' and '*Kisko khabar thi*'.

Alia Bhatt in *Gangubai Kathiawadi*

GANGUBAI IS BHANSALI'S PAKEEZAH (1972). GANGUBAI MAY BE SEEN AS A VERSION OF SAHIBJAAN/PAKEEZAH, WHO FINDS HERSELF IN THE GREAT MODERN CITY OF BOMBAY/MUMBAI RATHER THAN IN THE COURTLY WORLD OF THE THEN HINDUSTAN

So the multicoloured lavishness and excess of Bhansali's version in which family schemes were foregrounded was a shock to me. It took me a while to understand it and to see a different version of this story, truly assimilated to Hindi cinema while Bimal Roy's had such deep roots in Bengal. The songs were irresistible and they drew me into this new world which itself told how Hindi cinema itself had changed.

My favourite Bhansali film is *Bajirao Mastani* (2015) which created a world I had no preconception of, with spectacle, performances, songs and drama. It was in some ways a tribute to *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960), one of the greatest of all Hindi (or Urdu) films. The story of Bajirao and Mastani took place just over a century later than that of Salim and Anarkali. Bhansali is fully aware of the tribute to '*Pyaar kiya to darna kya*' he makes in '*Deewani Mastani*' and how these songs are part of Hindi film history.

Gangubai is Bhansali's *Pakeezah* (1972), which is the favourite Hindi film of so many people. Kamal Amrohi, who had worked as a scriptwriter on *Mughal-e-Azam*, directed few films but *Pakeezah* and *Mahal* (1949) alone make him one of the greats of Hindi cinema. Much has been written about Meena Kumari and *Pakeezah*, and Gangubai may be seen as a version of Sahibjaan/Pakeezah, who finds herself in the great modern city of Bombay/Mumbai rather than in the courtly world of the then Hindustan, just as Meena Kumari was a heroine of the post-Independence cinema, the way Alia Bhatt is of today's post-Bollywood.

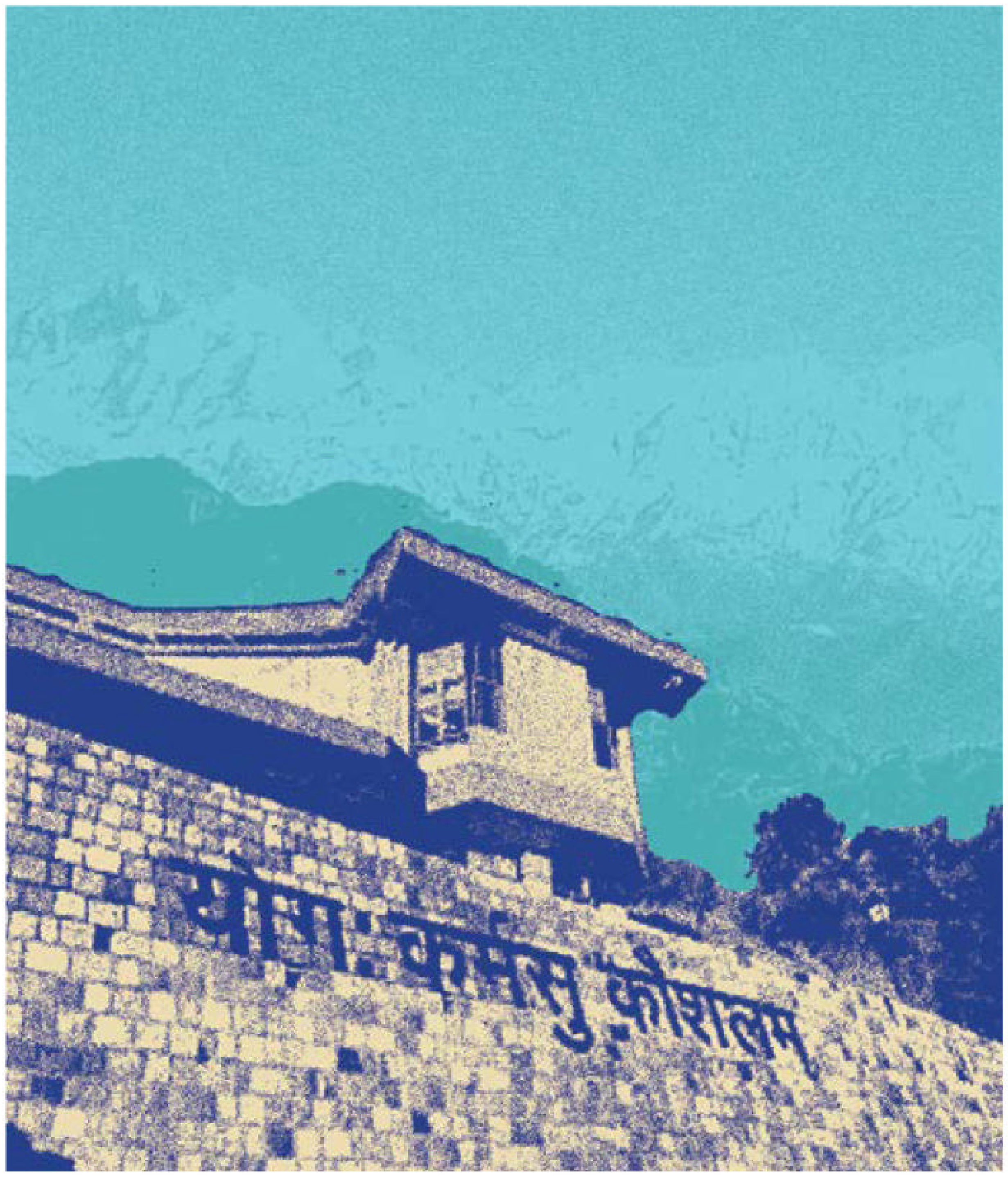
Bhansali's tribute to *Pakeezah* also takes in the history of film as it was in some ways a late iteration of the great Bombay Talkies studio. Founded by the Bengalis, Himanshu Rai and Devika Rani, the studio employed several Germans, including the director, Franz Osten whose most famous talkie was *Achhut Kanya* (1936). The film's lead actor was Ashok Kumar who appears as Pakeezah's father while the films had the same cameraman, Josef Wirsching. (At least in part for *Pakeezah*, as he died during the making of the film, but many of you will have seen him and his wife in the song, '*Itni badi mehfil*' sung by Asha Bhosle, featuring Helen, in the film *Dil Apna Aur Preet Parai* in 1960). Bhansali locates Gangubai in this history of the subgenre of the courtesan film and of Hindi cinema itself. Huma Qureshi's qawwali, '*Shikayat*, moves the courtesan's song from the *kotha* onto a Bombay street, decorated for a wedding as the public and private space is blurred, and the heroine's beloved is marrying someone else.

Alia Bhatt has a place in history as the Mumbai heroine for her outstanding performances in *Gangubai Kathiawadi* and *Gully Boy* (2019). She too brings in the history of Indian cinema as not only the daughter of Mahesh Bhatt but also as coming from one of the most famous Gujarati families in the Hindi film industry (Vijay, Nanabhai, Vikram), and she is now married into the massive Kapoor dynasty.

So while there are some new Hindi films that I anticipate and appreciate, few are in the tradition of the Hindi cinema that I love so much. Let's hope that this year we'll see a return to form. ■

INSIDER

TREKKING TRAINEES



Recent reports that the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration is considering extending the 'village stay' component for its trainees to three weeks from the current one week is not the only change in the curriculum of inductees to the Indian Administrative Service (IAS). In keeping with the reform objectives outlined in Mission Karmayogi, the academy is focusing on Himalayan treks and interactions with self-help groups in hill states and the Northeast. This is a welcome change aimed at making training more experiential and putting would-be administrators in touch with grassroot realities. Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu was recently at the academy and training has also been organised for state civil service personnel. The changes in selecting Padma awardees have seen many lesser-known people working to change lives for the better receive national recognition. Some of them have been invited to the academy to share their experiences, another step to put trainees in touch with real-world issues. In an interesting exercise called '*atma saakshaatkar*' (deconstruction) at the beginning of the training, recruits discuss their interaction with public services like health, education and employment applications. The new initiatives have been largely welcomed although they do involve a lot more physical exertion than was the case before. In the more remote parts of the hills near Mussoorie and elsewhere in Uttarakhand, it is not uncommon to see groups of IAS trainees trekking along the pathways. Not all look too happy as a love of the outdoors and its rigors is not universal. But it does seem new recruits will need to get hold of a good pair of walking shoes!

RESHUFFLE RUMOURS

Nothing animates Delhi's political grapevine like talk of a reshuffle of the Union council of ministers. Possibilities are discussed over several rounds of tea and coffee, and even stronger stuff, as promotions and exits are considered. It is a time of trepidation for many incumbents who might feel they are on a dicey wicket and requests to the media to carry articles authored by ministers explaining how they have delivered rise exponentially. This time, the supposed hour of trial being spoken of is around Makar Sankranti or Uttarayan, marking the transition of the sun, which falls on January 14. Given that the date is speculative, tensions will remain unabated till the start of the Budget session at the end of January. Official and party functionaries remain non-committal about such an exercise, merely noting that they would come to know about it when everyone else did. Last time a reshuffle happened it saw the exit of several BJP veterans and the induction of a younger crop of leaders, many with professional qualifications. Key changes included Union minister for railways, communications and electronics and IT, Ashwini Vaishnaw, whose Rajya Sabha candidacy was jointly supported by BJP and BJD. This time round, a shuffle, as and when it happens, will be an assessment of those who were made ministers and a final prep for the 2024 Lok Sabha polls.

Illustrations by **SAURABH SINGH**

EYE ON PFI

The recent ban on the Popular Front of India (PFI) as an "unlawful organisation" under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, or UAPA, has been much discussed in the light of the organisation having successfully set up a home base in Kerala while evading an outright ban for years. At a seminar in Delhi, a senior state police official outlined intensive counter-radicalisation measures undertaken by the force to prevent the spread of jihadist thought. It would seem the state government is considering urgent steps to prevent a recurrence of PFI activities which had developed national and transnational linkages.

CALL BEFORE YOU DIG

The Centre, along with the states, has launched a new app called "Call Before You Dig (CBuD)" that will allow various government agencies to coordinate before digging up roads and footpaths that can result in cuts in optical fibre cables that the government estimates result in estimated losses of ₹3,000 crore annually. While the application is being rolled out by the Department of Telecom, the concept is a further development of the PM Gati Shakti programme that has seen more than a dozen Central departments, and now several states as well, sharing information relating to physical assets and geological features that helps accelerate planning and implementation of projects. The new app uses similar principles to create a GIS (Geographic Information System) backbone that allows hundreds of 'layers' of information to become available for users, such as municipalities, water and power utilities, as well as state Public Works Departments.

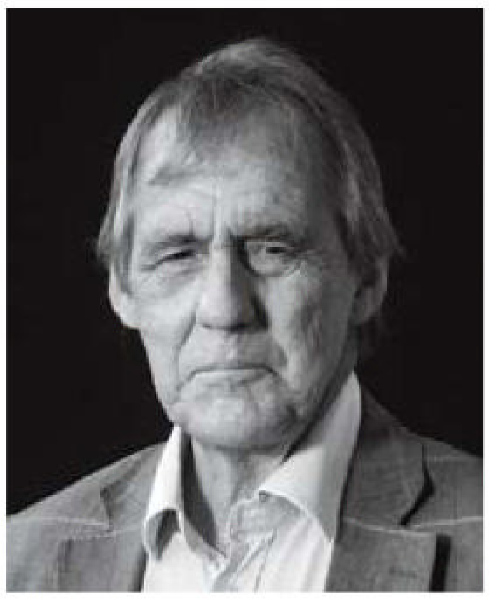
CHINA IN THE COLD

Reflecting the chill in ties, there has been no party-level visit between BJP and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) for some time now. Previously, a fairly senior party delegation had visited China and there were ministerial delegations too. All that is a thing of the past and it has become quite evident that even the semblance of normalcy may prove elusive until there is tangible progress in stabilising the border. Influential voices have called for the restoration of a political dialogue, noting that meetings between military commanders and foreign ministry officials are not enough. Thus, they have advocated a political initiative. Yet, given speculation that China's border adventurism may continue, and that India's national election is approaching, a thaw does not seem on the cards right now. China's problems with zero-Covid have presented its leaders with a fresh set of internal and international problems and a PR breakthrough with India is unlikely to happen without real progress in normalising the borders.

FACELESS BUT FAIR

Some time ago, a senior Union finance ministry official received an unusual delegation from the Shri Saibaba Sansthan Trust, representing the Samadhi temple of the popular saint in Maharashtra. The trust had received communication from the tax department that it could no longer be regarded as a religious endowment. The reason: the shrine did not have a specific religious denomination to qualify in the category and so would lose the exemption it was previously entitled to. The order left the trustees flummoxed as the shrine has attracted devotees and followers from all sects and communities, a feature that marks the saint's syncretic appeal. The official advised the trust to file an appeal which, under the 'faceless' norms, would go to an unidentified officer. Wait and see what happens to your appeal, the official said, adding that in the event of another adverse verdict, other means of redress could be considered. Although not very convinced, the trust officials filed the appeal. As it turned out, the order was reversed on appeal and the trust got back its benefits that enable it to carry out several welfare activities apart from running kitchens and providing accommodation at the shrine complex. The trust was overjoyed and the official felt vindicated that the faceless system was indeed providing the fair and timely hearing of cases it is meant to.

OPEN ESSAY



By JOHN KEAY

SACRED MYSTERY

The long quest for the elusive source of the Satluj at Kailash-Manasarovar

THE REPUTATION OF Mount Kailash as the most revered mountain in all Himālaya owes much to its unexpected proximity to a large body of water. Hindu temples customarily have access to a stone-lined pool, or 'tank', where worshippers perform their ritual ablutions. Kailash is no exception. Here, at over 4,500 metres above sea level, in the rain shadow of the Himalayas and amid the dust-blasted wastes of western Tibet, the most improbable of 'temples' is complemented by a glassy expanse of the clearest water. Eighty-eight kilometres in circumference, over 90 metres deep and roughly circular, Manasarovar (to Hindus) or Tso Mapham (to Buddhists) has been hailed as 'the holiest, the most fascinating, the most inspiring, the most famous of all the lakes in the world and the most ancient that civilisation knows'. Pilgrims circumambulate it just as fervently as they do Kailash itself; it takes a few days longer but has some easy stretches along the shoreline. According to Burrard and Hayden, the 1930s superintendents of the Indian Surveys, Manasarovar is not just 'famous in Hindu mythology' as having been mentioned in both of the great epics but is 'the first lake known to geography'. It has been acknowledged as sacred since 'before the dawn of history; and as such it has remained for four millenniums'.

Other authorities have been moved to write of this 'fairest of lakes' in more lyrical terms. 'She is majestically calm and dignified, like a huge bluish-green emerald or a pure turquoise set between the two mighty and equally majestic silvery mountains, the Kailash on the north and the Gurla Mandhata on the south.' This comes from the flowery pen of Rev Swami 1108 Pranavananda Maharaj, FRGS, the holder of a record even Milarepa might have envied in that Pranavananda (for short) had been semi-resident on Manasarovar for twenty-three years. During this time he completed, in all, twenty-five circuits of the lake and a like number of Mount Kailash. The swami was unquestionably the world's greatest authority on the region that he was the first to call Kailash-Manasarovar. A history of its exploration, which is really more a gazetteer, and a pilgrim's guidebook were his life's work. But he was not born to the mountains, nor did he die among them. He was called to them.

He was born Kanakadandi Venkata Somayajulu in 1896, a Telugu-speaking brahmin from what would become the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. He completed his education at a college in Lahore and worked for the railways before returning home as a Congress Party worker during the non-cooperation movement against British rule. From political activism he turned to religion and the natural sciences. He had received 'a call from the heights of the Himalayas in consequence of an internal urge for [the] search after Truth,' he says.

The call was mediated by the man who had become his guru. This was Shri 1108 Dr Swami Jnanananda DSc, PhD etc, a contemporary and also from Andhra, who had spent some years in the Indian Himalayas as a renunciate. According to Pranavananda, Dr Jnanananda had crossed the mountains on pilgrimage to Kailash 'wearing only a loincloth'. But Jnanananda was better known as an exponent of yogic philosophy and as one of India's foremost nuclear physicists (the DSc was from Dresden, the PhD from Liverpool). This example of ancient wisdom in the service of modern science appealed to Pranavananda; no doubt it explains his adoption of Jnanananda's honorifics (including that '1108', a sacred number in Hindu and Buddhist thinking and a nod, perhaps, to both men's mathematical competence).

No doubt, too, it was his guru's example that inspired Pranavananda to follow his example and head for the hills. In 1928,

Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar

ALAMY

THE IDEA OF FOUR OF SOUTH ASIA'S MIGHTIEST RIVERS ORIGINATING IN THE SAME UNKNOWN LAKE ON THE 'ROOF OF THE WORLD' CHALLENGED GEOGRAPHICAL OPINION. BUT AS EARLY AS 1812 WILLIAM MOORCROFT HAD INVESTIGATED THE MATTER AND APPARENTLY LAID IT TO REST. BUT THIS ONLY RAISED THE QUESTION OF WHERE, THEN, ALL THOSE RIVERS DID ORIGINATE

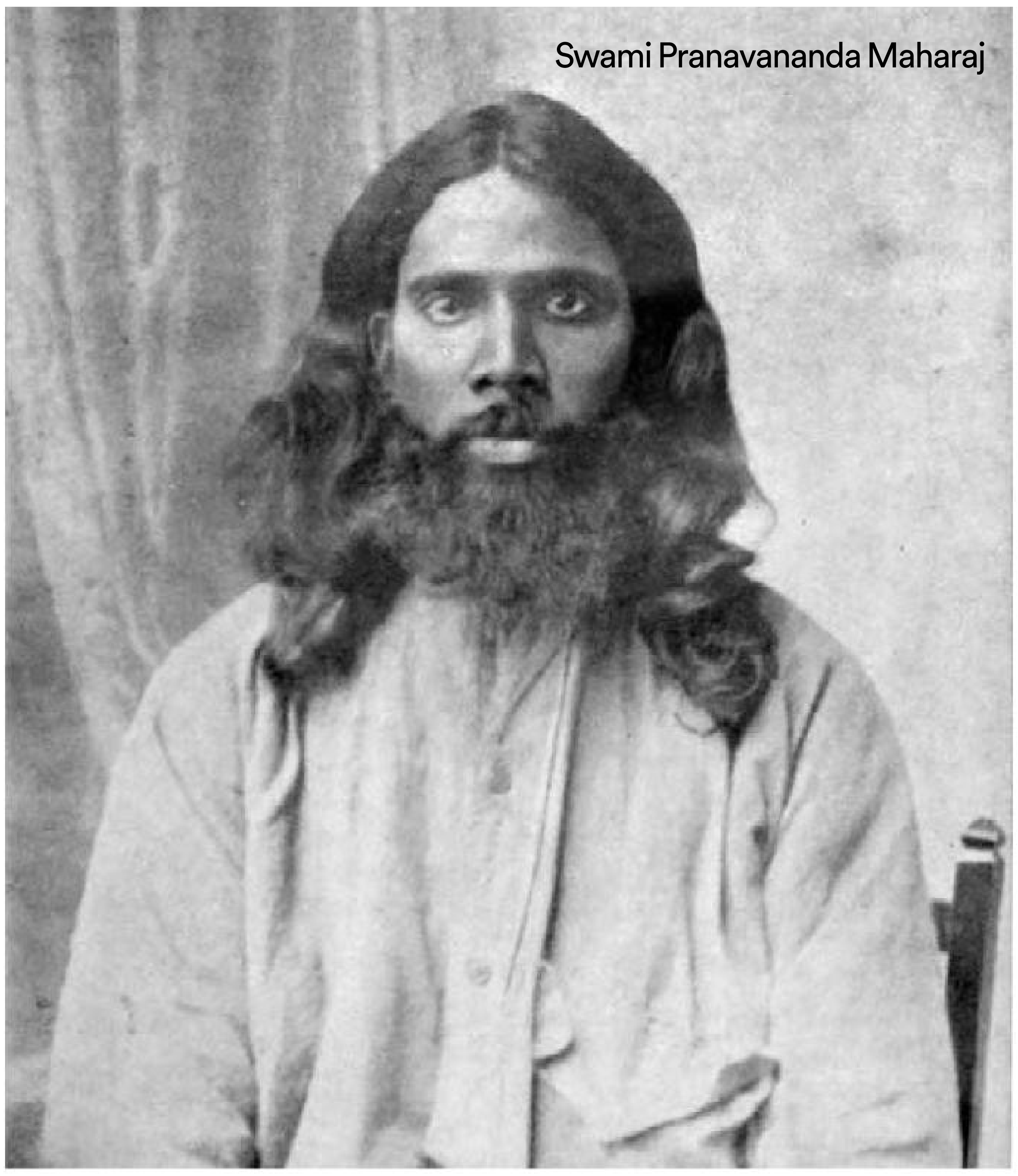
travelling as a pilgrim by way of Kashmir and Ladakh, Pranavananda made his first acquaintance with Kailash-Manasarovar. Thereafter he would return nearly every year until 1950, by which time India had gained its independence, Tibet had ceased to be a British responsibility and Hindu pilgrims were no longer welcome there. Pranavananda may have been relieved. He was by then in his mid-fifties, his hair had reached apostolic length and he must have been feeling the strain of the near-annual trans-Himalayan commute. Only twice did he pass what he calls 'a twelve-month' on the lake, overwintering in a nearby monastery. The lowest temperature recorded was minus 28 degrees Celsius on 18 February. 'It was so cold', he says, 'that the sputum of a person standing on the balcony [of his lakeside retreat] would reach the ground as solid ice.'

Throughout the years, Pranavananda's overriding objective remained 'the Truth'—or sometimes 'the Realisation of the ULTIMATE'. One can only hope he succeeded in finding it. Research has failed to reveal anything at all about his subsequent career. His pen seems to have been laid down for good in 1950; even the date of his death (in 1989) may be conjectural. His work schedule in Kailash-Manasarovar must have been demanding enough in itself. It meant compiling a record of everything that could conceivably pertain to the region, from the mystic to the mythological, geology to geography, archaeology to ornithology, mineralogy to zoology, cultivation to climate. In his published works, each of the sacred region's dozen or so monasteries is described and its particular associations recorded; so are Kailash-Manasarovar's several varieties of waterfowl, its four kinds of bear (including the 'man-bear', a possible yeti contender), the few available options in terms of fuel, and one or two interesting plants (including a creeper called *thuma*, 'a marvellous specific for spermatorrhoea and an excellent aphrodisiac'). No tarn is left unvisited by the swami, no cave unexplored, no sizeable rock unexplained. The grasses prove few, the fossils plentiful. Pilgrims are advised to wrap up warm and bring with them all the drugs indispensable to life in such extreme conditions. Some thirty nostrums are listed, plus 'an enema can or syringe', 'a rubber catheter' and 'a hot water bottle'. No mention of a spittoon.

Of particular interest to Pranavananda was the hydrography of the region. If Kailash's fame owed much to Manasarovar, Manasarovar's fame owed much to its being the traditional source of no less than four great rivers: the Indus, Tsangpo-Brahmaputra, Satluj and Karnali. Sometimes all were said to flow from the snows of Kailash itself. Pranavananda was not so gullible as to take any of this literally; ancient geographies invariably favoured simplicity and symmetry over precision and scale. But he realised that all these rivers could well emanate from catchment areas in the vicinity of Kailash.

European geographers agreed. In the nineteenth century they had made river sources, most notably those of the Nile, subjects worthy of attention in the name of science. Would-be explorers rose to the challenge; august bodies like London's Royal Geographical Society (RGS) assessed each discovery; and the wider public feted the returning travellers as celebrities. The 'true' source of the little-known Oxus in the remotest eastern Pamirs kept the savants arguing for the best part of a century. Even Lord Curzon, the former viceroy of India and later British foreign secretary, had lent his considerable authority to the debate.

The idea of four of South Asia's mightiest rivers originating in the same unknown lake on the 'roof of the world' challenged geographical opinion even more than the source of the Oxus. But as early as 1812 the ubiquitous William Moorcroft had investigated the matter and apparently laid it to rest. Travelling in what proved a not very convincing disguise, he and Hyder Young Hearsey, an Indo-British adventurer, had set off from Saharanpur, crossed the Great Himālaya by the Niti Pass and reached Gartok (the windy settlement chosen for the remotest of Britain's Tibetan trade agencies a century later), from where they turned south-east for Manasarovar. There, despite carefully examining most of the lake's shoreline, Moorcroft found no rivers at all emanating from Manasarovar; 'not a break, nor any other appearance indicated the escape of any river or even of any small stream from it', noted Moorcroft, 'Manasarovar sends out no rivers to South, North or West.' In fact the lake was, as Hearsey put it, 'perfectly insolated'.



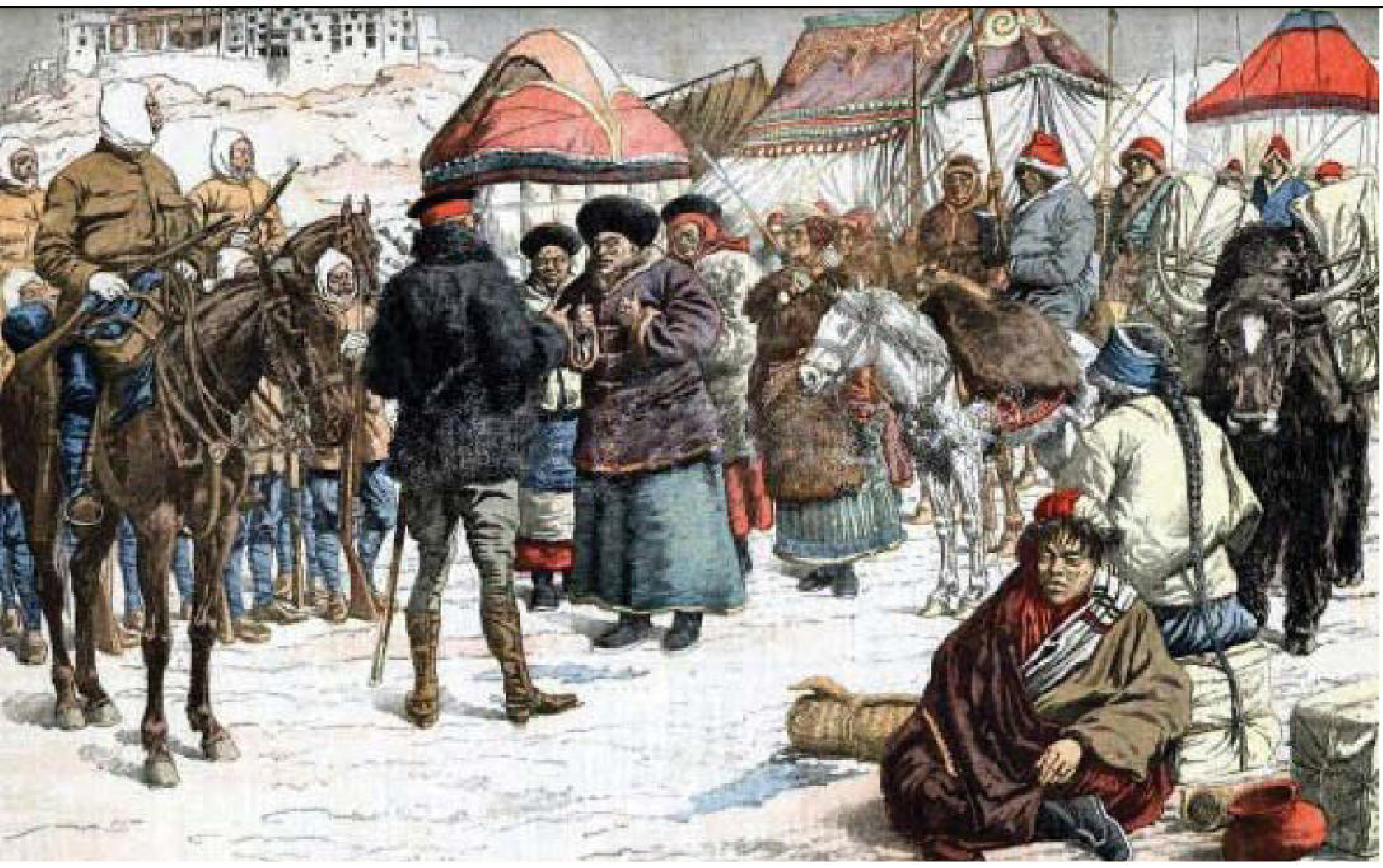
Swami Pranavananda Maharaj

PRANAVANANDA COMPLETED TWENTY-FIVE CIRCUITS OF THE LAKE AND A LIKE NUMBER OF MOUNT KAILASH. THE SWAMI WAS UNQUESTIONABLY THE WORLD'S GREATEST AUTHORITY ON THE REGION THAT HE WAS THE FIRST TO CALL KAILASH-MANASAROVAR. BUT HE WAS NOT BORN TO THE MOUNTAINS

But this only raised the question of where, then, all those rivers did originate. One possibility was Rakas Tal (Rakshas Tal, Rawan Hrud), a lesser lake just to the west of Manasarovar. Local tradition insisted that it was from this little-visited body of water that the infant Satluj flowed. But again Moorcroft drew a blank. He could find no watercourse running out of Rakas Tal and none running into it from Manasarovar. The drainage of both lakes was becoming as much a mystery as that of the rivers.

Further investigation from British India then had to wait. Interest was stalled by the first Anglo-Sikh War in the mid-1840s and the Great Rebellion ('Indian Mutiny') in the late 1850s. In between, the need to establish the frontiers of the new state of Kashmir (which included Ladakh) brought two border commissions to western Tibet. Henry Strachey, a British officer whom Pranavananda would consider the region's greatest geographer, served on both of these and, like his brother Richard two years later, visited Rakas Tal to ascertain whether there was any sign of the Satluj issuing from it. There wasn't; but to the Stracheys' surprise there was a goodly stream gushing into Rakas Tal. It came from Manasarovar, and Moorcroft could only have missed it because it didn't exactly flow out of Manasarovar; it percolated down from it. Invisible to anyone following the lake's shoreline, it seeped through and beneath a wide embankment of shingle, not to emerge into its own twisting bed till some distance away. This being the case with Manasarovar, it was just possible the Satluj issued from Rakas Tal in similar fashion. Thus Manasarovar might indeed be that river's ultimate, or 'genetic', source. And if there were more such subterranean seepages, the great lake could yet be the source of the Indus and the Tsangpo-Brahmaputra as well. The possibilities were several, the problems far from solved.

NO ONE PAUSED to ask whether it was all worth it. Great minds were being distracted, young lives risked, local sensibilities offended, international relations endangered, and all because of an obscure geographical conundrum involving the vagaries of snow-fed rills and invisible seepings on the barely breathable heights of the Tibetan tundra. Yet somehow the absurdity of the quest only added to its appeal. Better still,



English Officers Meet the Tibetans, published in *Le Petit Journal* in 1904

THE ABSURDITY OF THE QUEST ONLY ADDED TO ITS APPEAL. ITS SCIENTIFIC PLAUSIBILITY AFFORDED COVER TO ALL WHO CHOSE TO CHALLENGE TIBET'S CLOSED FRONTIERS. ALL CHEERFULLY PROFESSED AN INTEREST IN HIMALAYAS' HYDROGRAPHY

its scientific plausibility afforded some welcome cover to all who chose to challenge Tibet's closed frontiers. Sportsmen intent on bagging Tibetan trophies, mineralogists excited by reports of Tibet's goldfields, spies on the lookout for gaps in the imperial defences, gun- runners arming distant pockets of discontent—all cheerfully professed an interest in Himālaya's hydrography.

In *A Mountain in Tibet*, Charles Allen's classic account of this whole saga, Ekai Kawaguchi, a Japanese monk with a poor sense of direction, vies with an unsavoury braggart called Henry Savage Landor in attracting the unwelcome attentions of the Tibetan authorities. From time to time, like wandering albatrosses, the Survey's long-distance Pundits pass quietly by, counting their paces as they come and go. Further north, where Tibet peters out in the empty quarter of the Changthang, a succession of international contenders files along the horizon. French expeditions like those of Gabriel Bonvalot and Prince Henri d'Orléans, or the unfortunate Dutreuil de Rhins (murdered in Jyekundo), are interspersed with swooping incursions by the unstoppable Nikolai Przhevalsky and his later Russian lieutenants.

From China in the 1880s William Woodville Rockhill, a Tibetophile member of the American legation in Beijing, had taken an interest in the Goloks when cutting across Qinghai and had named a peak that could well have been Amné Machin as Mount Caroline. The sportsmen (and sportswomen) are if anything over-represented. In 1895 Captain HHP Deasy, a entertaining Dubliner after whom a gerbil, *Dipus deasyi*, was named, found whole hillsides in the Changthang alive with the dainty antelopes known as chiru; his companion 'who had experience in sheep-farming in America, was of the opinion that at least 15,000 were seen'. A year later the Liverpool Littledales—St George Littledale, his sharp-shooting wife Theresa, a lanky nephew and a fox terrier called Tammy—got to 'within 48 or 49 miles [77-9 kilometres] of Lhasa'. Against all the odds, it was therefore this family group that drew nearer to the Tibetan capital than anyone before Younghusband, including the insufferable Landor and those unstoppable trailblazers, Nikolai Przhevalsky and Sven Hedin. Naturally none of them advertised their designs on the ultimate prize of Lhasa. Denying any such intention made it easier to concede defeat when they were forced to turn back—as they invariably were. Yet nearly all openly avowed an interest in Kailash-Manasarovar and its lakes.

For any but a devout Buddhist like Alexandra David-Néel, the Younghusband-led invasion of Tibet in 1904 dispelled the allure of Lhasa. Lord Curzon, the viceroy responsible for authorising the incursion, nearly apologised for it. 'I am almost ashamed of having destroyed the virginity of the bride to whom you aspired, viz, Lhasa,' he would tell Sven Hedin. But the main Younghusband expedition went nowhere near Kailash-Manasarovar and had added nothing to the mystery of the rivers. Nor, later that year, had Cecil Rawling and 'Hatter' Bailey in the course of their winter's journey through western Tibet to Toling-Tsaparang and Simla. Bailey was busy stalking a black wolf when they passed within sight of Kailash. He returned, bearing the carcase, just in time for a brief inspection of the two lakes. Neither man was impressed. Strachey's channel linking the lakes turned out to be bone dry, though 'they were assured by local Tibetans that it filled up when the snows melted in the summer'. The same went for an old streambed leading out of Rakas Tal that might once have been the Satluj—no water.

It was beginning to look as if the source of the Satluj was lost to the Kailash-Manasarovar region. So too was that of the Karnali, which becomes the principal river of western Nepal before reaching the Ganges as the Ghaggara. Likely contenders as the remotest feeders of both these rivers descended from the Himalayan passes to the south, not from Kailash to the north, and veered away before either reached the lakes. ■

This essay draws upon Himālaya: Exploring the Roof of the World *(Bloomsbury, 432 pages, ₹699) by John Keay. Keay is a British historian specialising in India, China and the Far East*

RP - Sanjiv Goenka Group

MANY ILLUSTRIOUS ICONS. ONE ICONIC EVENING.

Celebrating outstanding achievements in diverse fields.

JEWELLERY PARTNER
1870
KISHANDAS & CO.
HERITAGE
HYDERABAD

FRAGRANCE PARTNER
ENGAGE
L'AMANTE

LUXURY PARTNER
FABELLE
Exquisite
CHOCOLATES

CELEBRATION PARTNER
Glenfiddich.
SKILLFULLY CRAFTED. ENJOY RESPONSIBLY.

SNACKING PARTNER
BINGO!

HOSPITALITY PARTNER
TAJ
KRISHNA
HYDERABAD

DECOR PARTNER
casafleur
the flower boutique

GIFTING PARTNER
SAREGAMA
CARVAAN®

HELLO! HALL OF FAME SOUTH

ASSOCIATE PARTNERS

OBEETEE CARPETS

Brew & Bliss

ONEPLUS

THE FIRST EDITION OF HELLO! HALL OF FAME AWARDS SOUTH

TUESDAY, 24TH JANUARY 2023

BY INVITATION ONLY

Cover Story

2023
A SPACE ODYSSEY

Vikram-S, India's first privately built rocket, being launched from Sriharikota, November 18, 2022

OVER A HUNDRED STARTUPS ARE PUTTING INDIA ON THE ROAD TO BECOMING A MAJOR PLAYER IN THE GLOBAL SPACE ECONOMY. THEIR SERVICES RANGE FROM BUILDING ROCKETS, PROVIDING RIDESHARES FOR MICRO AND SMALL SATELLITES TO LAUNCHING SPACE BALLOONS FOR TOURISM, STREAMING LIVE HD VIDEO FROM SATELLITES AND MORE

BY V SHOBA

LATE LAST YEAR, AS PAWAN KUMAR CHANDANA AND NAGA BHARATH Daka were celebrating after their six-metre-long, 550-kg, single-stage rocket named Vikram-S—after Vikram Sarabhai—passed the government's stringent review process, they were stumped by a question that had never before been raised in India. How do you insure a private rocket launch? What happens if the rocket crashes into an object in space or on Earth? Who determines the extent of financial guarantee? "We had passed all the checks and got the launch licence in record time. There was no precedent for insuring a private rocket launch in India. The government had to vouch for our rocket and agree to be liable beyond the extent of

possible damage covered by the insurer," says Chandana, a former ISRO (Indian Space Research Organisation) scientist and co-founder of Skyroot Aerospace, a four-year-old startup. Skyroot's first rocket, which was also India's first private rocket, had a smooth suborbital launch from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre (SDSC) in Sriharikota in November. The demo mission, named 'Prarambh', or Beginning, kicked off a series of upcoming launches by the company, the first of which is scheduled for the last quarter of this year.

Hailed as India's SpaceX, Elon Musk's rocket company valued at about $140 billion, Skyroot is more like Rocket Lab, a much smaller startup whose Electron rocket is highly modular and can launch microsatellites on short notice. The hope is that Skyroot can do one better and offer the lowest cost per kilogram of payload. Made of carbon fibre, a hardy material that is lighter than space-grade steel—and costs nearly the same, says Daka, also an ex-ISRO scientist—Skyroot's rockets are built almost entirely in India, thanks to a robust vendor ecosystem mentored by ISRO over the years. "Where we needed to adopt new processes like 3D printing, we worked with vendors who supply to the automobile sector and trained them. For the propulsion system structure, for instance, we wrote the software to 3D print it. That took months to finetune but it automated manufacturing once and for all," says Chandana. The 220-people company built several sub-scale models and tested them again and again until everything was perfect. "There was a lot of pressure to get it right on the first launch. The thermal protection system had in fact failed several times and we had to consult chemists to understand how to fix that problem," says Chandana. When the company test-fired India's first 3D-printed liquid-fuel engine in 2020 amid a Covid lockdown, it went without a hitch.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the inauguration of IN-SPACe headquarters in Ahmedabad, June 10, 2022

PIB

SKYROOT RECENTLY RAISED $51 million in a new funding round led by Singapore's GIC—the largest funding round ever in Indian space tech—but it wasn't always easy for space companies to raise money. "In 2018, we raised the seed round led by Mukesh Bansal in two weeks, but Series A was tough. Skyroot benefited from the experience of successful entrepreneurs who understood the risk they were taking at a time when funds didn't have a thesis for the space sector. Luckily for us, the founders of Greenko believed in us and put in $7 million," says Chandana. At $163.3 million, the country's highest valued space startup is hoping to be a part of the beginning of the commercialisation of space from India. Vikram-S is one of many firsts that together launched India's private space technology industry in 2022.

There are over 10,000 companies and 5,000 investors active in the global space industry that is worth over $470 billion. With a surge in interest in space applications globally, from internet-from-space to navigation, India, one of the few countries with a robust space programme and an equally robust startup culture and technology workforce, wants to be a key player in the global space economy. And as per a report by the Indian Space Association (ISpA) and Ernst & Young, which estimates the Indian launch services market to grow from $600 million in 2020 to $13 billion by 2025, it is well on course.

Ever since the Indian government opened up the space sector to private companies by setting up the Indian National Space Promotion and Authorization Centre (IN-SPACe) as a single-window, independent, nodal agency in the Department of Space in 2020, favourable policies, quicker development cycles, falling costs and access to capital have conspired to form an ideal breeding ground for space tech startups. There are over a hundred startups fuelling India's new space ambitions—from building rockets and testing clean propellants to mapping space and recording space weather, offering rideshares for micro and small

A hyperspectral image of Lake Geneva captured by a Pixxel satellite

satellites, launching space balloons for tourism, streaming live HD video from satellites, and developing sensors to better observe Earth from space.

Perhaps it is this space-faring future that Arthur C Clarke, the visionary sci-fi writer, dreamed of when he wrote that any sufficiently advanced technology was indistinguishable from magic. "*Baap re*," was Prime Minister Narendra Modi's reaction when he saw a prototype of Agnibaan, a customisable two-stage rocket under development at AgniKul Cosmos' rocket factory in Chennai. Once ready, AgniKul will offer launch bookings from its website. "The long-term goal is that launching to space should be like booking an Uber. By making our rocket a configurable vehicle, we are hoping to reduce launch lead times to two weeks," says Srinath Ravichandran, CEO and cofounder of the startup. The 125-people company has also built a launch pedestal, named Dhanush, and inaugurated India's first private launchpad and mission control centre at SDSC in Sriharikota. Ravichandran is among the believers in space expansion as the future of mankind. "For now, space remains an exotic destination. But it will become a platform with unique advantages. For

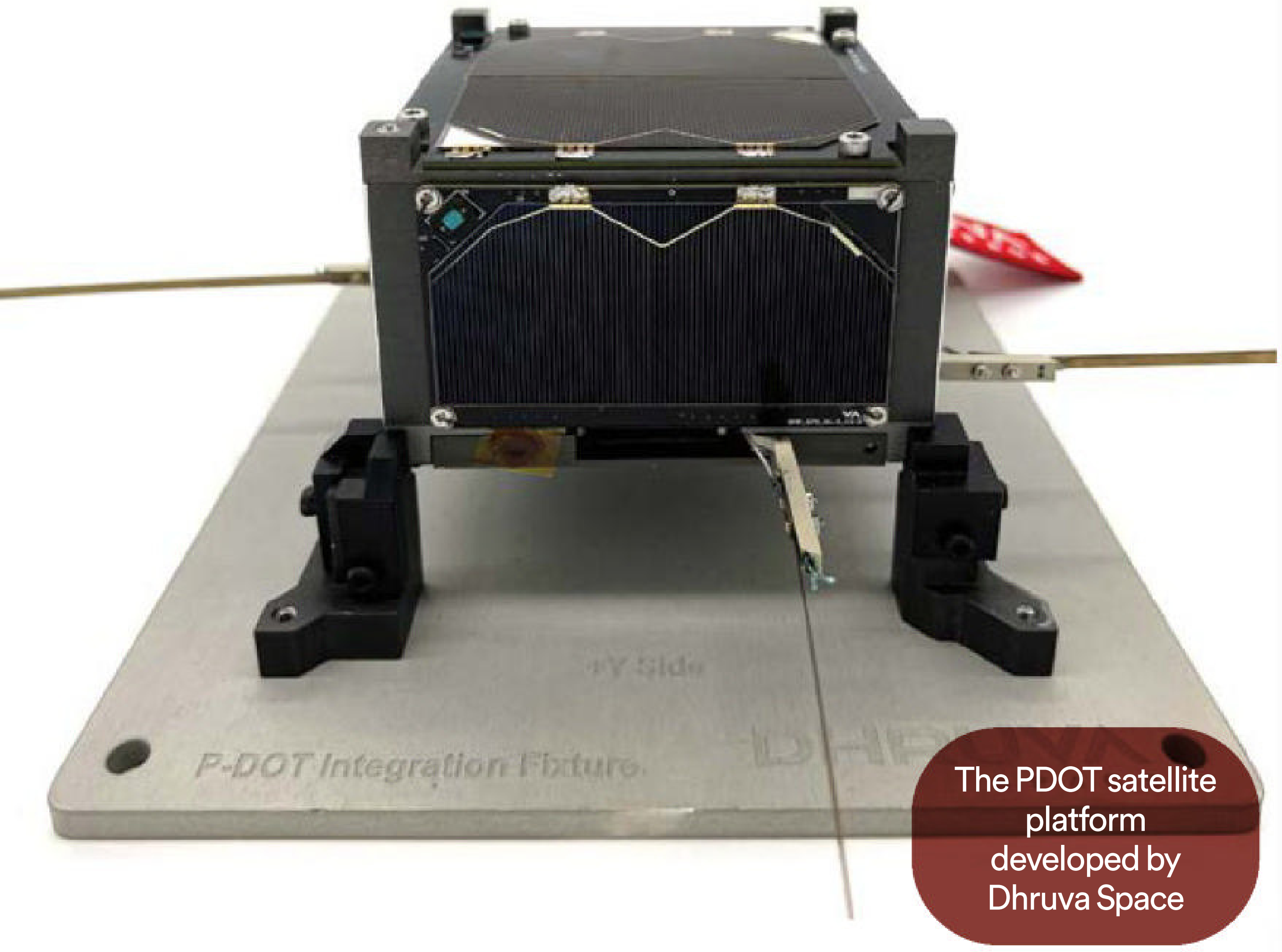
> “INDIAN STARTUPS ARE ONLY LIMITED BY THE AVAILABILITY OF TALENT AND THE QUALITY OF WORK MSMEs ARE DOING FOR THE SPACE SECTOR. AS INDIAN UNIVERSITIES HAVE NO SPACE EXPERTISE TO OFFER, WE HAVE TO HIRE FROM THE EV AND EMBEDDED SYSTEMS SEGMENTS AND TRAIN THEM IN-HOUSE”
>
> **KSHITIJ KHANDELWAL**
> **FOUNDER AND CTO, PIXXEL**

instance, the low temperatures and microgravity can be useful to manufacturing processes.”

WHILE AGNIBAAN’S LAUNCH is imminent, a string of launches by private Indian companies has set expectations soaring. Pixxel, a Bengaluru-based startup that aims to send up a constellation of hyperspectral satellites to observe Earth in never-before-seen detail, had two successful launches last year—those of ‘Shakuntala’ on SpaceX’s Falcon-9 rocket in April and ‘Anand’ onboard ISRO’s PSLV in November. Founded by Awais Ahmed and Kshitij Khandelwal in 2019 when they were still students at BITS Pilani, Pixxel has already signed up dozens of clients even as it prepares to set a hyperspectral constellation of six satellites—to be eventually expanded to 24—on a Sun Synchronous Orbit at a 550-km altitude to cover any point on Earth every 48 hours in 5-metre resolution. The applications of such data are endless—from mining, forestry, climate monitoring and agriculture to energy companies that may, for instance, want to scan for and plug pipeline leaks. Hyperspectral imaging offers a wider slice of the electromagnetic spectrum, revealing details not captured by ordinary cameras. "We saw a clear gap in space imaging and wanted to offer the highest resolution," says Khandelwal. With some of its employees—their Slack is 99 people—as young as 19, India's youngest space startup is also arguably its most market-ready. "Once the constellation is up, the applications are global," Khandelwal says. "With falling development costs and better access to capital—FOMO has set in among venture capitalists eyeing space tech portfolios—Indian startups are only limited by the availability of talent and the quality of work MSMEs are doing for the space sector. As Indian universities have no space expertise to offer—even the scope of the student satellite programme has been truncated—we have to hire from the EV and embedded systems segments and train them in-house."

Even as three billionaires race one another to space for sub-orbital tourism, to beam internet from satellites, and to take humans to the moon and Mars—had they worked at ISRO, jokes a founder, it would have taken them 20-25 years to make the decisions they are making today—Indian startups are all fired up to be part of this new space age. "India has become a

> "EVERYONE IS IN PARTNERSHIP MODE NOW. WE COULD USE SKYROOT TO LAUNCH OUR SATELLITES AND THEY CAN BE A POTENTIAL VENDOR FOR OUR DEPLOYERS. BELLATRIX IS ANOTHER STARTUP WHOSE PROPULSION SYSTEMS COULD BE USEFUL TO US"
>
> **CHAITANYA DORA SURAPUREDDY**
>
> **CO-FOUNDER AND CFO, DHRUVA SPACE**



The PDOT satellite platform developed by Dhruva Space

INTERVIEW **JITENDRA SINGH**

'SPACE TECH WILL

The Union Minister of State (Independent private players access to ISRO's expertise will

The year 2022 was a busy one for Indian space technology. What are your expectations in the light of new policies that will allow private participation? Have private companies contributed to the Gaganyaan mission?

The new space policy of 2022 envisages greater private participation in systems development and operation of space systems as compared to the private sector's earlier role as supplier of subsystems. This is enabled through IN-SPACe (the Indian National Space Promotion and Authorization Centre) and provisions in space reforms to utilise the Indian Space Research Organisation's (ISRO) expertise and facilities.

There is a role played by private companies in hardware manufacturing and supply in most systems, which include almost 80 per cent of the rocket, crew module and service module, almost all the subsystems. ISRO is doing the system engineering and final integration.

With the sector now opened up, what other reforms are in the works? When is the much-anticipated space policy likely to be announced?

IN-SPACe is starting promotional programmes to support startups for incubation and access to facilities. They are coming out with a differential pricing policy for access to facilities and data to support new entrants in the space sector. The foreign direct investment (FDI) policy in the space sector and space policy are under consideration.

While startups have got a lot of attention, they are not the only private players in space. Could you elaborate on how the L&T-HAL contract for the next five PSLVs and the launch of OneWeb satellites from India are gamechangers?

This is the first time the entire PSLV is contracted to an industry consortium to manufacture and market. ISRO will handhold them for the first five rockets, and later they will do the job themselves. This is a gamechanger as the industry's role is enhanced. Through this we hope that the industry will learn the finer aspects of rocket-building and will one day become capable of doing it themselves.

The OneWeb launch opens up the new market of small low Earth orbit (LEO) constellation launches from India and for LVM3 in particular as a commercially attractive launch vehicle in the world market. This is significant as heavy mass launches are also coming to India as a preferred destination.

BE THE BACKBONE OF DIGITAL 5G'

Charge) for Science and Technology tells **V SHOBA** that new initiatives granting
transform them into rocket builders while a space FDI policy is in the works

PIB

How can space tech help bridge the digital divide in India and improve access to downstream uses like healthcare and education? For too long we have been a nation that launches satellites but struggles to fix sewage problems.
Space technology and sanitation are two different ends of technology. Accomplishing space tech feats demonstrates the technological prowess of the nation. Space tech is an inspirational sector that demonstrates "We Can Do It". Now it is an emerging sector with business and economic benefits. Space capability has different dimensions in civilian and strategic sectors, and that is why it is a closely guarded national capability even if developed in the private sector. The space segment is more into providing communications services and will be the backbone of the digital network of 5G and IoT networks, with seamless connection between terrestrial and space networks.

The application side in health and education was demonstrated by ISRO already through EDUSAT and telemedicine. Now it has to be taken forward by service providers for commercial exploitation. Many initiatives are being taken in this direction. The telemedicine programme is now hosted by operators using the ISRO satellite network.

To increase the space sector's growth, technological advancements like space grade solar cells, green propulsion tech and reusable launches are imperative. With this in mind, do you have incentives for researchers to solve next-generation problems in space exploration?
ISRO is working in all these domains and also conducts funded research in other institutions. The Department of Space encourages development of technologies in the private sector and is coming up with plans to support them. The announcement of opportunities for focused R&D in the private sector will be made soon.

Are there any plans to strengthen synergies between academia and the space tech industry?
That is already happening. Academic institutions have incubated many space startups. Space startups have to seek knowledge from institutions of higher learning to bring innovations to products for a competitive edge over others.

Is India prepared for potential satellite hacks? With the creation of NewSpace India Limited (NSIL), what is the mandate of Antrix Corporation now?
The potential of space hacking is addressed through many mechanisms and all efforts are made to ensure safety. The security issue is continuously monitored and systems upgraded to handle any future threats.

ANTRIX continues to carry out business activities related to Earth observation data marketing to potential users. It is mandated to do business based on ISRO's technology and capabilities. NSIL is mandated to carry out business on its own by funding new systems and market launch vehicles as well as satellites through its own investments.

While ISRO has helped build a stable vendor ecosystem over the years, space startups exploring cutting-edge technologies like 3D-printed engines are struggling to train MSMEs. What can India do to quickly 'upskill' manufacturing to serve Indian as well as global space companies?
Much more technology growth is needed in sectors like 3D printing, currently based on acquired technologies developed elsewhere. So ISRO is making efforts to develop core competence in this domain by active research in associated areas and later transferring knowledge to industries as was done in the past in other areas.

Upskilling can happen only with innovative technology development in the ISRO system. It is applicable in areas like reusability, high-temperature materials, advanced electronics, and propulsion technologies. ■

land of opportunity for space tech," says Yashas Karanam, co-founder of Bellatrix Aerospace, a seven-year-old deep-tech startup based in Bengaluru. "While we have something of a first-mover disadvantage, we have been ramping up since the government announced the opening up of the sector during the pandemic." Primarily a propulsion tech company, Bellatrix has shifted gears to work on several verticals at once. It has built one of the world's smallest propulsion engines, and a green monopropellant thruster to replace high-toxicity hydrazine thrusters. It is also working on an orbital transfer vehicle, which is like an Uber Pool for satellites capable of precise orbital insertion. "We can take several satellites to different orbits on a single rocket launch. Why pay for a chartered flight if you can hitch a ride for a fraction of the cost?" Bellatrix has signed an MoU with Skyroot for the use of its orbital transfer vehicle on Vikram launchers. It is also in talks with other Indian companies interested in deploying its highly efficient hall-effect thrusters.

With startups finding their core competencies, there are beautiful synergies emerging within the nascent ecosystem. "Everyone is in partnership mode now," says Chaitanya Dora Surapureddy, co-founder and CFO of Dhruva Space, a full-stack space engineering company offering satellite platforms, launch solutions and ground stations. "We could use Skyroot to launch our satellites, for instance, and they can be a potential vendor for our deployers. Bellatrix is another startup whose propulsion systems could be useful to us," he says. After building India's first very high frequency ground station—for BV Raju Institute of Technology, Hyderabad—in 2019, Dhruva, started by longtime friends Sanjay Nekkanti, Surapureddy, Abhay Egoor and Krishna Teja Penamakuru, secured a $2.7 million contract the following year to supply

> “WE HAD PASSED ALL THE CHECKS AND GOT THE LAUNCH LICENCE IN RECORD TIME. BUT THERE WAS NO PRECEDENT FOR INSURING A PRIVATE ROCKET LAUNCH IN INDIA. THE GOVERNMENT HAD TO VOUCH FOR OUR ROCKET AND AGREE TO BE LIABLE BEYOND THE EXTENT OF POSSIBLE DAMAGE COVERED BY THE INSURER”
>
> **PAWAN KUMAR CHANDANA** CO-FOUNDER, SKYROOT AEROSPACE

SKYROOT
AEROSPACE
ROOT

Skyroot founders Pawan Kumar Chandana (left) and Naga Bharat Daka space-grade solar arrays for satellites. In October 2021, the company raised ₹22 crore in funding led by the Indian Angel Network and Blue Ashva Capital. Last year, Dhruva launched two amateur radio communication nanosatellites, named Thybolt 1 and Thybolt 2, aboard ISRO's PSLV-C54. Both missions are based on Dhruva's PDOT platform.

FOR SPACE STARTUPs, there is a sense of racing towards a finish line and being part of something larger. "We largely work with Indian vendors. On occasion we have upgraded a part of their facilities—this, we find, is a good way for us to not invest too much in our infrastructure. We want to show that a space startup does not need to burn a lot of money and can be run frugally. We have been generating revenues from six months of operations," says Surapureddy.

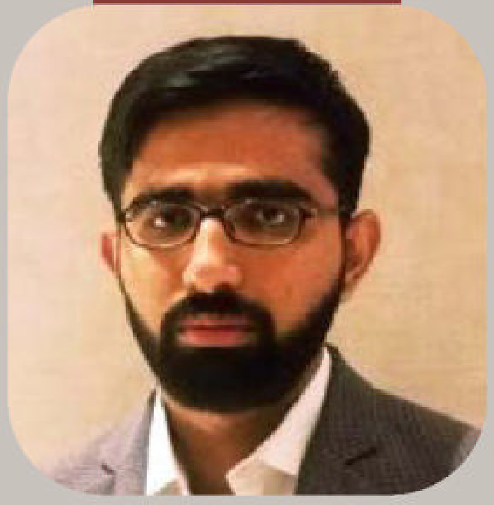
"With the startup ecosystem rapidly taking shape, ISRO can finally turn its focus to research for major missions, including Gaganyaan and Chandrayaan, leaving the routine launches to private players. In any case, 80 per cent of the manufacturing process is already in the hands of private companies," says Chandana. Meanwhile, ISRO has set an example for the space industry by executing one of its largest ever commercial missions. In October 2022, ISRO's LMV3 (previously known as GSLV MKIII), the agency's heaviest rocket, was used to launch 36 commercial satellites for the Sunil Bharti Mittal-backed OneWeb constellation. A major milestone for the Indian space industry, it signalled India's readiness to launch global satellites aboard its most advanced rocket. "On the one hand, space can bring downstream opportunities like high-speed internet from space to link digital black spots across India using OneWeb, Starlink or other constellations. On the other, India can contribute to the space economy by manufacturing satellites for customers across the world, offering inspace propulsion solutions and developing better Earth observation technology. Clearing space debris could be another opportunity for India, with the US Federal Communications Commission voting to enforce post-mission disposal of low-Earth orbit satellites within five years," Chandana says.

With the low Earth orbit (LEO) becoming more congested than ever, Digantara, a space situational awareness startup that is building a map of objects in orbit 400 km to 2,000 km from Earth, has an interesting value proposition. It can not merely track objects and space debris and help avoid collisions but also predict space weather with its radiation sensor. Anirudh Sharma, CEO and founder of Digantara, claims the company can help predict and plan for events like the solar storm that sent at least 40 SpaceX satellites out of orbit last year. "We have been trying to understand the impact of peak solar activity this past year on satellites," he says. Digantara kicked off the new year with the launch of its second satellite, Pushan-Alpha, onboard a SpaceX mission to LEO. The satellite will serve as a space weather testbed and complement the company's ROBI (ROBust Integrating proton fluence meter) mission, the world's first commercial space-based space weather monitoring system that was launched by ISRO's PSLV-C53 on June 30 last year. One of the first Indian companies to get launch authorisation, Digantara has big plans. It has built a SaaS platform to help design a satellite, put it in orbit and model its behaviour. It wants to send up first eight, then 16, and eventually 24 satellites to congested orbits with the aim of adding a data layer to the maps that already exist. "As the industry grows, we want to be ready with a space traffic management system and collaborate with international agencies on framing regulations," Sharma says.

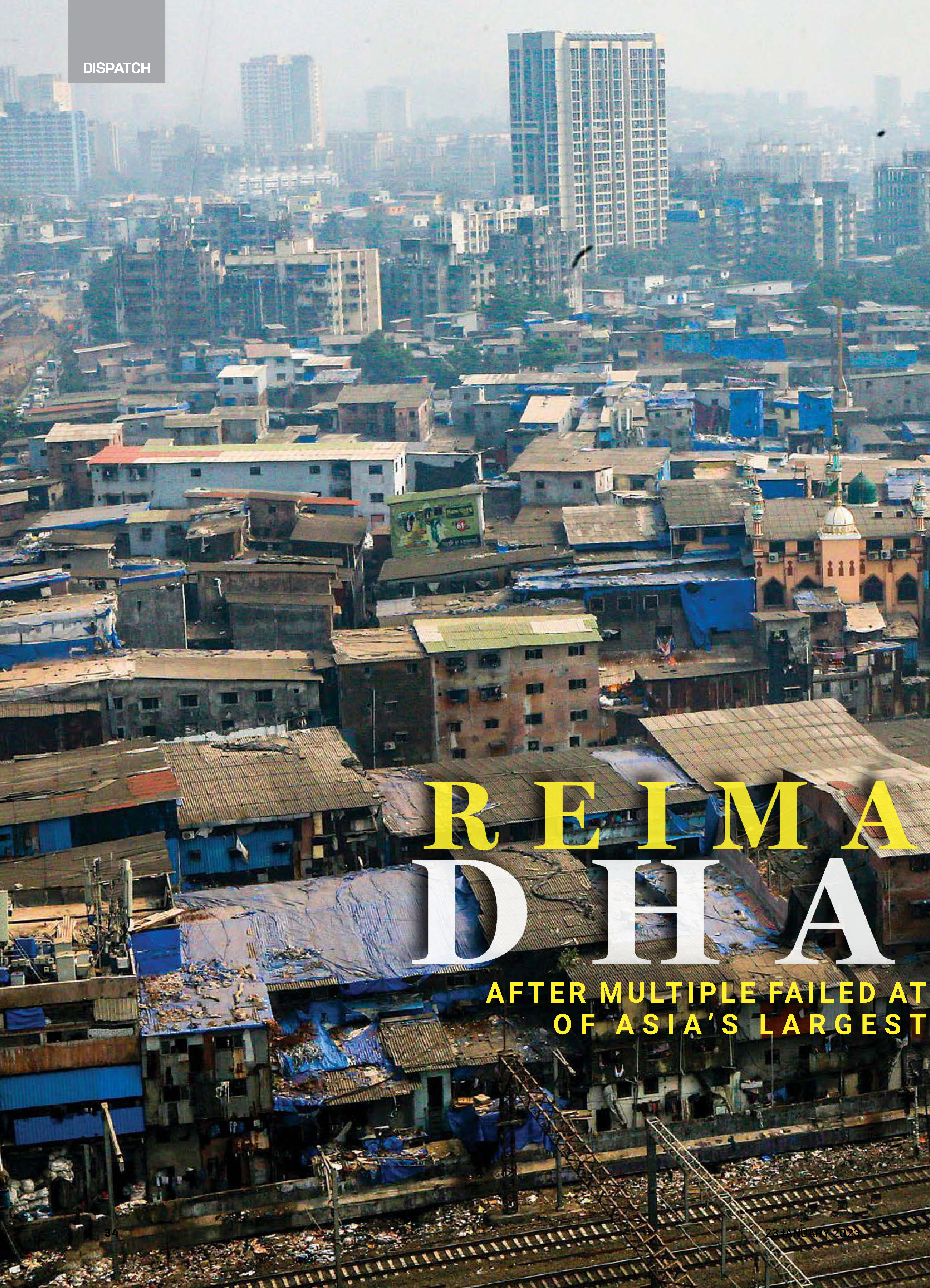
Among the Indian companies that have tied up with Digantara for its spatial awareness data is Manastu Space, a space safety and logistics startup that is working on an autonomous collision avoidance system based on green propulsion. The company hopes that its novel propellant, MS-289, will help ensure space-faring remains sustainable. "Space has a role to play in almost all critical problems that humanity is solving. It cannot be allowed to be polluted the way our air and oceans have. Some of the most critical technologies of the space era will therefore involve green propulsion and debris avoidance," says Tushar Jadhav, co-founder, Manastu Space.

Man has always looked to the heavens for answers. With India's space dreams being nurtured by startups, we can look up hoping to catch a glimpse of a homegrown constellation going round Earth solving problems. ■

> "WE CAN TAKE SEVERAL SATELLITES TO DIFFERENT ORBITS ON A SINGLE ROCKET LAUNCH. WHY PAY FOR A CHARTERED FLIGHT IF YOU CAN HITCH A RIDE FOR A FRACTION OF THE COST?"
>
> **YASHAS KARANAM**
> **CO-FOUNDER, BELLATRIX AEROSPACE**

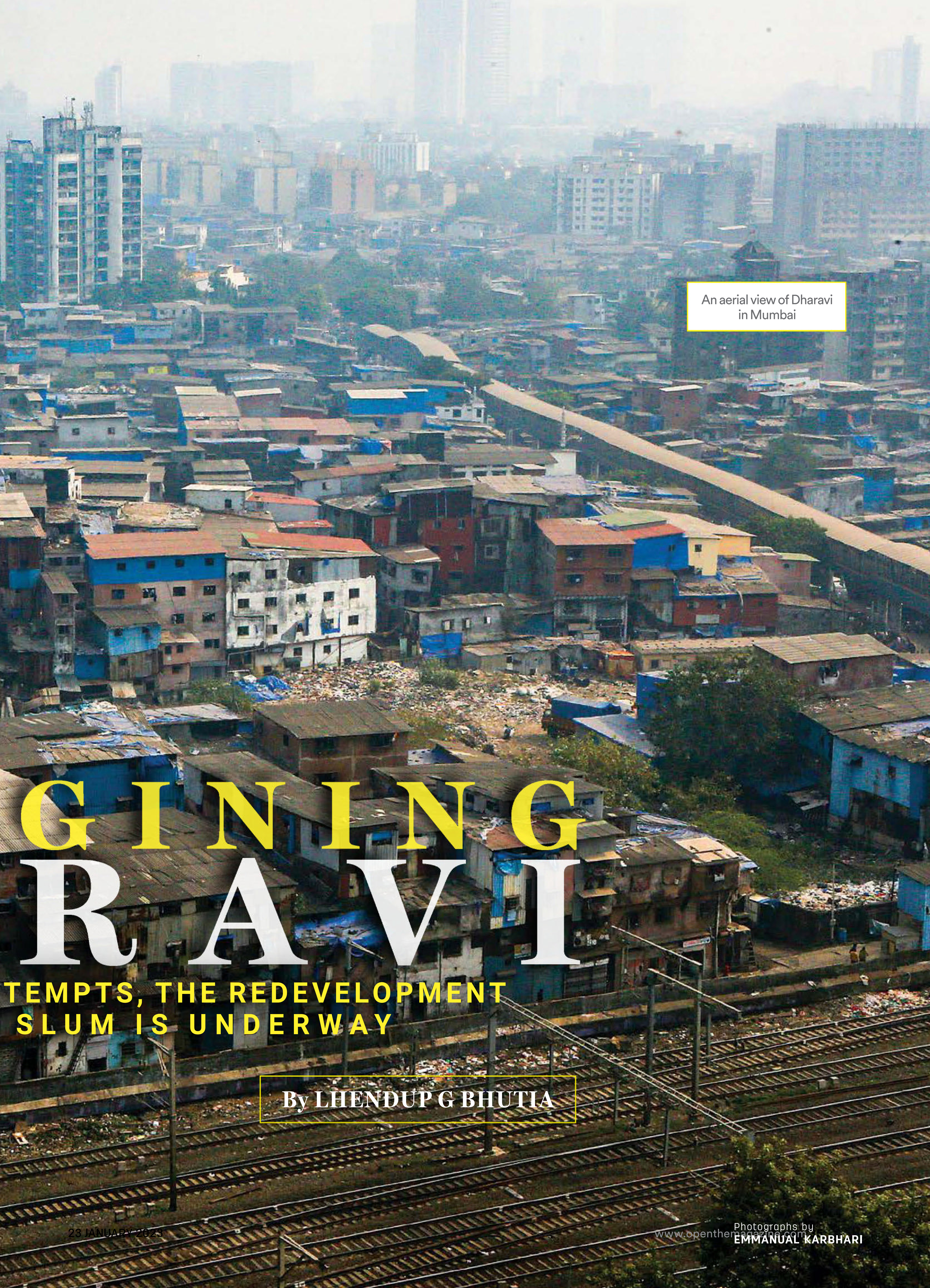


> "SOME OF THE MOST CRITICAL TECHNOLOGIES OF THE SPACE ERA WILL INVOLVE GREEN PROPULSION AND DEBRIS AVOIDANCE"
>
> **TUSHAR JADHAV**
> **CO-FOUNDER, MANASTU SPACE**



REIMA
DHA

AFTER MULTIPLE FAILED AT
OF ASIA'S LARGEST



An aerial view of Dharavi in Mumbai

GINING RAVI

TEMPTS, THE REDEVELOPMENT SLUM IS UNDERWAY

By LHENDUP G BHUTIA

Photographs by
EMMANUAL KARBHARI

IT'S NEARLY 7PM, AND A LANE that shoots off from Dharavi's 90 Feet Road has shrunk to one so narrow that no more than a single individual can pass at a time. The noise of the street has been suddenly replaced by the sound of many tiny homes at night, and there is little light here, except for what spills out of the bulbs and TV sets in these houses. Amidst these homes, atop a few steps, Rajamani Nadar sits in a room brightened with LED lights. A large man dressed in a white shirt, Nadar is the secretary of the Dharavi Food Products Manufacturers Association. He issues orders every few minutes, sending his orderlies scampering to retrieve old dusty files containing newspaper clippings and documents of their association's submissions to the government. Nadar has turned up at this office this evening to preside over a special meeting he has called to discuss the ramifications of the latest plan to redevelop Dharavi. And through the evening, men dressed in *lungis* and speaking only Tamil, keep showing up in this office. These individuals, most of whom have ancestral roots in Tamil Nadu, run small one-room factories in Dharavi where it is said most of the city's fried savouries known as *farsans* are made. They come in ones or groups of twos and threes, and after they fill the office space, they take up the space on the stairs outside.

"Look for any document," Nadar tells them. "A ration card, a bill, anything—that shows you have a factory here. We need to show we have always been here, making *farsans*."

Dharavi, Asia's largest slum and arguably its most well-known, is a maze of lanes and bylanes located in the centre of Mumbai. Its residents, living in cramped spaces and many of them working in the thousands of small commercial units spread across Dharavi—from those that churn out *farsans* like Nadar and his colleagues, to others like potters, leather manufacturers, garment-makers, welders and plastic recyclers—have transformed this marshy outpost into a vast and informal residential and economic centre. For decades now, there have been attempts to redevelop this area, but it has made little progress beyond the paper. The locality contains some of the poorest individuals living in one of the most valuable land parcels in the city. And, among residents, this has naturally built up apprehensions about being shortchanged. Now, with the realty arm of the Adani Group having won the bid to redevelop Dharavi, its residents and business owners are gearing for the possibility of change. Foremost on their minds is whether such a redevelopment, first proposed sometime in the 1990s, will finally take place. And if it does, will this re-imagined Dharavi have space for its residents? "It is a good thing if it happens," Nadar says. "But whatever is done, you cannot transform Dharavi without taking its people along."

"Do you know it took 14 years to just get the tender process done?" asks SVR Srinivas, the Metropolitan Commissioner of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority (MMRDA) and the chief executive officer (CEO) of the Dharavi

DHARAVI EMERGED AS AN UNREGULA
A SKILLED AND CHEAP LABOUR FORCE. A
AND GARMENT MANUFACTURERS, FROM

Kumbharwada, the potters' colony inside Dharavi

TED SPACE ON THE BACK OF THEN BOMBAY'S BOOM. DHARAVI HAD LARGE NUMBER OF BUSINESSES GREW, FROM TANNERIES TO TEXTILE POTTERY TO PLASTIC RECYCLERS AND FOOD MANUFACTURERS

Redevelopment Project. We are seated in his office, on the top floor of the MMRDA building. Outside the windows, one can see the spread of the plush Bandra Kurla Complex, a once-empty marshland along the Mithi River that has been transformed into one of the country's most valuable pin codes in a little over two decades.

"Doing a project in Mumbai is like doing an operation on a running man," Srinivas says. "And this is Dharavi we are talking about. Calling the project a challenge will be an understatement. It is going to be the world's largest urban renewal project. We are building a city within a city. Name the complexities you can face in a community development programme, and you have all of that here."

These range from the huge numbers who will need to be rehabilitated (the often quoted 58,000 homes and 13,000 commercial units is based on a 2008 survey, and the present number is expected to be much larger) to the nature of the area, where thriving small-scale industries coexist with the residential units. "Plus, there is the constraint of geography. Because it is still a limited space, you will have to rehabilitate lakhs of people. And then the airport is very close. So we aren't permitted to go beyond a certain height," he says. Another issue, he points out, is going to be that of eligibility. Since the cut-off date for individuals who will be eligible for rehabilitation is set at those who can prove they have been living in the area before January 1, 2000, many will be ineligible and will need support. "We can't just throw them out. We will have to accommodate them in some way," he says. "The whole project is going to require a lot of out-of-the-box imagination and execution, and work to be done on multiple fronts."

THE MAHARASHTRA GOVERNMENT has so far issued four tenders for Dharavi since first mooting the plan. The first two, in 2007 and 2016, did not elicit the expected response. A 2019 tender, under the Devendra Fadnavis government, saw the UAE-based Seclink Technologies emerg-

Rajamani Nadar
in his workshop

> "We want to expand our facilities. But right now, **there are lots of restrictions against such expansion in Dharavi.** With redevelopment, these will be lifted and more opportunities will probably come. **But the government will have to keep us in mind and help us along the way**"

RAJAMANI NADAR
secretary, Dharavi Food Products Manufacturers Association

TAKEN FOR A RIDE

Lessons from the alleged Patra Chawl redevelopment scam

IN ITS CHEQUERED history, the redevelopment of slums and low-income housing has often enough been mired in scams and controversies that leave helpless house owners with nowhere to turn. In December last year, buyers of flats in the Patra Chawl redevelopment project demonstrated, demanding the implementation of rent and housing agreements that are yet to be resolved in a project initiated as long ago as 2008.

The controversial case saw the arrest of Shiv Sena MP Sanjay Raut, a confidant of former Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray, for alleged money laundering. Raut recently received bail with the special court stating that the Enforcement Directorate (ED) had failed to arrest Rakesh and Sarang Wadhawan of Housing Development and Infrastructure Limited (HDIL). The court held that Raut and his aide Pravin were denied parity in view of ED failing to act against the Wadhawans. Raut is currently out on bail and waging his legal battle, but the controversy remains an object lesson in how redevelopment projects can take home buyers, many of them pensioners, for a ride.

The Patra Chawl case turned the spotlight on the Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Authority (MHADA) as well due to the suspicion that its officials had been complicit in duping buyers. Initially, MHADA had awarded the contract to an HDIL subsidiary to redevelop a 47-acre plot. It was to redevelop part of it for close to 700 families and dispose of the remaining area. The plot was not redeveloped while land parcels were sold to other builders. The allegation levelled by ED was that FSI (floor space index) was sold illegally, benefitting the builders and the contracted firm. With the redevelopment yet to be completed, buyers are demanding additional rent although now MHADA has taken responsibility for the project.

GETTY IMAGES

Sanjay Raut outside Arthur Road jail in Mumbai, September 19, 2022

ED has alleged that proceeds of crime were utilised to purchase property in Alibaug and pointed to bank deposits linked to the sale of land parcels. The agency has in its chargesheet pointed to the role of political persons and said that the contract to redevelop the chawl was part of a plot to make illegal gains.

The case took on a political hue with Raut writing to then Rajya Sabha Chairman M Venkaiah Naidu, claiming that he and his family as well as associates were being harassed by agencies. The MP was arrested by ED and the case grabbed headlines with former BJP MP Kirit Somaiya saying that Maharashtra Vikas Aghadi (MVA) leaders would have to account for alleged corruption and misuse of official machinery when they were in office. Somaiya had earlier stated that he was assaulted by Shiv Sena workers owing allegiance to the Thackeray faction when MVA was in office and he had submitted complaints to the police.

Plans to redevelop slums and chawls have been drawn up periodically but without much success. At times, slum dwellers have protested and the redevelopment plans did not support the residence-workshop nature of dwellings that were to be redeveloped. On other occasions, people allotted flats soon sold them off and returned to living in slums. ■

By RAJEEV DESHPANDE

---

ing as the top bidder. But when some railway land, not part of the original tender, had to be incorporated into the project, the Uddhav Thackeray government cancelled the earlier tender in 2020. The realty arm of the Adani Group won the tender issued last year with a bid of ₹5,069 crore. It is expected to rebuild 259 hectares of the area at a cost ₹20,000 crore within a period of 17 years.

The stakes of various interest groups, from the politicians and real-estate developers to residents, have often appeared to be at cross-purposes with each other. And this has affected past attempts at rehabilitation. The residents have found themselves caught between the developer and the government and their own aspirations. And coupled with the long delay, many are now anxious about their future. "We are not against development," says Anil Kasare, a resident of Dharavi. "But our concern is that it has to be fair and done honestly."

Kasare is a 52-year-old resident of Dharavi's Mukund Nagar area. He does various odd jobs in the locality and also serves as the general secretary of Jankalyan Grihnirman Development Samiti, which claims to represent the interests of over 1,500 houses in Dharavi. "The problem right now is that, because it has taken so long (for the redevelopment), we have very little faith in anybody. Where will we move when the work begins? They might say one thing, but will they even bring us back or dump us somewhere? How do we know any of these things?

Nobody has come and spoken to us about these issues," he says. Raju Korde, the president of another such group, the Dharavi Redevelopment Committee (DRC), remains equally sceptical. "There is no real surety right now that it will happen. The whole rehabilitation part is expected to be finished in seven years, and the whole project in 17 years, but the penalty amount for delays is quite low," he says. "Also, with the current eligibility criteria, perhaps 30 to 35 per cent of Dharavi's present residents will find themselves ineligible. If they aren't taken care of, the project might be devastating for them."

Korde is the kind of enterprising character you find in Dharavi. Born here to a father who had moved from Ahmednagar in Maharashtra, unlike his siblings who dropped out of school early to support the family, Korde was allowed to continue in school and eventually went on to complete a Bachelor's degree in law. As a teen, he rented sewing machines and employed people to sew shirts, before moving on to open a telephone booth, which later became a mobile repair shop, after which he opened a printing business, followed by stints as a freelance reporter for Marathi language newspapers, and then established his own neighbourhood paper *Dharavi Times*, and also dabbled in Marathi theatre while working in the local branch of the Communist Party of India. Korde now lives close to Dharavi, continues to hold on to a shop in Dharavi while working with the Peasants and Workers Party of India, and is also involved in Slum Rehabilitation Authority (SRA) projects. In 2002, when the government first began to chalk out plans to redevelop Dharavi, Korde realised, he says, that the plan was drawn in favour of builders and not Dharavi's residents.

THE REALTY ARM OF THE ADANI GROUP WON THE TENDER ISSUED LAST YEAR WITH A BID OF ₹5,069 CRORE. IT IS EXPECTED TO REBUILD 259 HECTARES OF THE AREA AT A COST ₹20,000 CRORE WITHIN A PERIOD OF 17 YEARS

A residential-cum-commercial lane in Dharavi

He established DRC which has organised protests earlier to push for better conditions for residents.

"The other big factor which developers often don't think about much is the many small factories that work out of this locality. You cannot redevelop this land without protecting their interests," he says.

DHARAVI EMERGED AS an unregulated space on the back of then Bombay's boom. As the city and its industries grew, labourers came here from all over the country and settled in this locality. Dharavi had a skilled and cheap labour force, and a vast informal network among workers, middlemen and suppliers, and a large number of businesses grew, from tanneries to textile and garment manufacturers, from pottery to plastic recyclers and food manufacturers. The result is perhaps the most diverse neighbourhood in all of Mumbai, where even as lanes and passageways get narrower, the languages you hear become more varied, changing from Hindi to Marathi to Tamil and many more every few minutes.

Nadar works in the mostly Tamil-dominated *farsan* industry in Dharavi. Composed of small manufacturing units, over 10,000 individuals are estimated to be employed in this industry. Units that made these snacks first came up to cater primarily to the many small drinking joints that ran in this part of the neighbourhood. But over time, even as many of these joints closed down, *farsan* manufacturers found a larger market in the rest of the city. Nadar came to Dharavi as a 12-year-old from his hometown in Tamil Nadu. He was following his father who had moved earlier and begun to work at one such *farsan* unit. "I started as a kid cycling to other parts of the city to sell these *farsans* for profit. Later, I started my own establishment, and along with others, now sell our products to most places across Mumbai." To him, redevelopment will not be such a bad thing. "We want to expand our facilities. But right now, there are lots of restrictions against such expansion in Dharavi," he says. "With redevelopment, these will be lifted and more opportunities will probably come. But the government will have to keep us in mind and help us along the way," he says.

Srinivas isn't fazed by the scepticism among locals. It is only natural, he says, given how long-drawn talk of redevelopment has been. According to him, enough elements have been built in to ensure that every resident, eligible or not, is taken care of. While the eligible will be given homes measuring 405 square feet, those ineligible will be accommodated within the Mumbai Metropolitan Region and helped out with rent, with the aim being to eventually help them become house owners. At the same time, commercial units will be compensated for the disruption that will be caused while the construction goes on—by reimbursing the entire amount of the State Goods and Services Tax (State GST) they pay for a period of five years. "There is going to be constant dialogue with the residents through representatives and directly with them and their concerns will be addressed in right earnest," he says.

> "A project in Mumbai is like an operation on a running man. And this is Dharavi we are talking about. **Calling the project a challenge will be an understatement.** It is going to be the world's largest urban renewal project. **We are building a city within a city**"
>
> **SVR SRINIVAS** Metropolitan Commissioner MMRDA and CEO, Dharavi Redevelopment Project

The main point of difference between this attempt and those that failed before, according to him, is that earlier attempts were developer-driven. "Here, the government is going to be a party. The government will have a 20 per cent stake in the SPV (Special Purpose Vehicle that will be overseeing the redevelopment), and it will have its own directors on the board of directors. The government is there to make the SPV accountable to the local people," he says.

There is still a long way to go before work on the ground begins. A fresh survey will have to be carried out, the SPV will have to be formed, and communication will have to start with the locals, apart from working out the urban planning aspect. "It has become romantic to celebrate the slum. You have Oscar-winning movies set here, and slum tourism here. But we are trying to mainstream Dharavi. We want to make Dharavi a space where, while protecting its identity, it is safe and healthy, where livelihoods are protected, and the economy is vibrant," he says.

To others like Kasare, whatever the outcome, the new Dharavi will probably be an unfamiliar place. "Some of us like me were born and raised here. We have fought for years for the interests of residents during redevelopment," he says. "But when the redevelopment does happen, and even if it goes to plan, I don't know how I will really feel about it." ■

THE RAGE OF TH

E SPARE

The misery memoir of a lost prince

By Roderick Matthews

Prince Harry and his wife Meghan in London, March 5, 2020

GETTY IMAGES

ROLL UP! ROLL UP! IT'S POPCORN O'CLOCK, and time to enjoy the greatest celebrity grudge match of the century. King Charles' second son, Prince Harry, has gone public with his various gripes about only being 'the spare', playing second fiddle to his older brother, the trainee king, Prince William, who is 'the heir'.

Result—a Force Ten media storm around the arrival of Harry's misery memoir in the shops this week. Trails, teases and leaks have shown us what it contains, and it is not pretty reading for the heir, who is accused, along with his wife Kate, Duchess of Cambridge, of years of jealous sniping, undermining and even physical violence. It's all out in the open now, in unprecedented and excruciating detail.

So, pull up a chair and enjoy the Windsor Big Bash, the heavyweight smackdown event we thought we'd never see.

In the blue corner, Harry! The plucky challenger, the noisy underdog. In the slightly bluer corner, it's Wills! Undefeated, taciturn, a man who can rip a necklace off an opponent with one hand.

We don't often see two prime celebrities go up against each other. Careful fight-fixing usually keeps such precious stars well apart. Muhammad Ali always dodged a showdown with Mother Theresa in the 1970s, and Elvis neverput his rhinestone-studded belts on the line. But now we are witnessing a clash between two of the world's most bankable faces.

So what is Harry up to?

He wants to break the rules of the two overlapping worlds he inhabits—royalty and celebrity. Royals don't fight in public, and celebrity is not meant to carry serious content. Harry's mission is to establish himself outside royalty and above celebrity, and to secure for himself a merited status based on morality—the social justice causes he champions.

This is hugely empowering for him, and in the short term he gets nothing less than a new life. But there are longer-term risks. Having rejected his official position, he can only speak for himself, and his only claim to moral authenticity is to cast everyone else as the bad guys.

So, is there anything of substance at stake here? Um. No.

Despite the fears of some commentators in Blighty, the monarchy is not in jeopardy. There are no constitutional issues in question and the line of succession is not in dispute. Harry left the UK after being told he could not be 'half in, half out' of the royal family. He insisted he wanted to protect his privacy.

But Hexit did not and will not provoke any kind of crisis. We are seeing a battle of press releases, not another War of the Roses.

Granted, Harry is conducting several legal assaults on selected bastions of British press power, so some changes might eventually come to the domestic media landscape. But the head that wears the crown can sleep easy for now. In a recent 90-minute UK TV interview, the discontented 'spare' specifically pledged his loyalty to 'the institution' and the people within it. He says he loves his family and supports the monarchy. He assures us that he has never been happier.

So why, at only 38, did this happy man decide to write a tell-all autobiography, full of sex and drugs and rockin' royal, in which he criticises close family members and the British press across hundreds of pages? Why did he call his stepmother, the Queen Consort Camilla, a 'villain' on US TV?

In his own words, it is because he wants to speak his truth, to tell his side of the negative stories about him which appeared in the press. This means abandoning the tried and tested royal strategy of never complaining and never explaining.

His father, he says, begged him not to do this, and urged him to accept the unfairness of the world as it is. King Charles believes that the royal family must rub along with the press as best it can, but Harry's idealism led him to reject his father's advice. Silent suffering holds no attractions for a man who has gone through therapy and is married to a woman who believes strongly in it. To remain silent is to collude with abusers, he believes. The book, therefore, is the centrepiece of Harry's campaign to improve himself, his family and the world.

> Harry may be the darling of the tofu-eating wokerati, but the stolid qualities of William—his very dullness—reflect the position he is due to inherit much more accurately than Harry's scatter-gun compassion. The late queen, for all her public virtues, was essentially an unexciting personality, as was her father before her. The last British monarch who wanted an active role, the late queen's uncle Edward VIII, was asked to leave. Harry is opting for instability, and 'the institution' will reject anything that leads that way, leaving him to saw through the branch on which he is sitting

Princes William and Harry in London, April 26, 2018

Harry and William with their mother Diana

Harry's own mother used television to state her case in her own words. Diana had supportive media coverage throughout her life. She could talk to anyone she wanted and plant any story she wished, and she did. But Harry does not seem to understand the nature of the shift between the positive coverage he had prior to his wedding in 2018 and the criticism he endured after it. He sees nothing of his own doing to explain it

Photos **GETTY IMAGES**

And here is the real fight hidden under the personalities—a pitched battle between the egocentric world of therapy, feelings and self-actualisation, and the impersonal, tight-lipped, buttoned-down world of institutions, tradition and hierarchy.

After marrying Meghan Markle in 2018, Harry wanted a flexible role where he could espouse global causes as he chose and drop in on royal business as and when. This would have allowed him to integrate his wife's priorities into the wider royal matrix, without confronting her too directly with how low she actually ranks in terms of royal protocol. Meanwhile, he could become the star of his own show and not a permanent also-ran in someone else's. But the senior managers of Brand Windsor would not allow him to be so free.

When Prince Edward and his wife, Sophie, asked for something similar about 20 years ago he was also denied, so Harry has not been especially victimised. But he doesn't see it that way. The new book, *Spare*, the recent six-part Netflix docuseries and the Oprah Winfrey interview of March 2021 have all been designed to catalogue his and Meghan's suffering at the hands of an unholy alliance of unnamed members of his own family and the British press. The couple's only sin? To want freedom to be themselves.

PRINCE HARRY
SPARE

But surely they have that now, living in a mansion in California, with the bonus of a comfortingly large pile of media-generated cash. So, why is that not enough?

He says he wants a reconciliation, but revealing intimate family secrets while accusing close relatives of spreading untruths seems more likely to intensify rather than de-escalate hostilities. Another crucial demand is for the guilty to be held accountable for what they have done. But what can accountability mean in the context of the people he is accusing? Royals aren't appointed or dismissed in the standard way. Nor are press barons.

This disgruntled former employee will not bring down 'the Firm', though if he can successfully prove in court that British newspapers did indeed break into properties in order to conceal microphones, then he stands a good chance of seeing penalties inflicted. Meghan has already won several rounds in British courts over press intrusion. We can only wait and see.

As for the rest, the prospects are bleak. It would be extraordinary if senior royal figures were to break the habit of many lifetimes and engage in public negotiations with one of their own. Wayward royals have low bargaining power and tend to get cut off, at which point they usually wither. Harry may have been seized with the notion that he can get validation via approval from the public and/or contrition from his kin, but the very essence of royal status is that it is unearned. Bringing merit into the equation, in persons and causes, as Harry seems intent on doing, is, to say the least, a novel and unproven strategy.

Harry may be the darling of the tofu-eating wokerati, but the stolid qualities of William—his very dullness—reflect the position he is due to inherit much more accurately than Harry's scatter-gun compassion. The late queen, for all her public virtues, was essentially an unexciting personality, as was her father before her. The last British monarch who wanted an active role, the late queen's uncle Edward VIII, was asked to leave.

In short, Harry is opting for instability, and 'the institution' will reject anything that leads that way, leaving him to saw through the branch on which he is sitting.

For all his apparent poise, and the genuine aura of conciliation he projects, Harry is a deracinated solo player and it is hard to believe that he is really in control of events. He is like a general who does not seem too clear about the geography of the battlefield he has chosen.

The relationship between royalty and the media has always had a strong element of quid pro quo running through it. Harry's own mother used television to state her case in her own words, though

GETTY IMAGES

Harry and King Charles III at the Committal Service in Windsor Castle after Queen Elizabeth II's state funeral, September 19, 2022

most commentators, in retrospect, view Diana's famous 1995 interview with Martin Bashir as a disaster. Perhaps Harry thinks he can be surefooted where she slipped, because natural justice is on his side. He may be remembering the enormous popularity he enjoyed when he was first engaged to Meghan. Or he may just be ill-informed, isolated and desperate.

Therapy has rebuilt Harry, guiding him from a state of depression to a sunnier, optimistic place where it turns out that he is not to blame for anything. So, the famous incident when he dressed up as a Nazi for a fancy-dress party turns out to be his brother's fault. Who chose the costume? Who put it on? The answer to those questions should have told him who was responsible, no matter what an obliging therapist might say.

NOT UNREASONABLY, HE blames paparazzi intrusion for the death of his mother. They hunted her relentlessly and were directly connected to the circumstances of the car crash that killed her. They even stood by and jostled for shots as her life ebbed away. He has expressed fears that the same thing might happen to his wife. But, in wider context, he seems to be a man complaining about a system he does not understand.

Diana had supportive media coverage throughout her life. She could talk to anyone she wanted and plant any story she wished, and she did. But Harry does not seem to understand the nature of the shift between the positive coverage he had prior to his wedding in 2018 and the criticism he endured after it. He sees nothing of his own doing to explain it.

The press is not an organ of moral judgement. It is a capitalist enterprise, and its business is selling papers, attracting eyeballs, and delivering audiences to advertisers. This is not a hidden process and anyone who works in the industry understands it. The press cannot turn a saint into a sinner; what it tends to do is find the sins hiding behind the image of sainthood, which is a way of enforcing accountability on the rich and famous.

There are always limits and discernible guidelines. The British press never ran the 'George Michael Is Gay' story; he was well liked and seemed to be doing very little harm. It did not run the 'Jimmy Savile Is a Monster' story, partly from fear—he was highly litigious—but mostly because the evidence was never fully compiled in his lifetime.

Harry is attempting an ambitious double move; to present himself as the victim, and the royal family and the media as a many-headed monster. It remains to be seen whether this is overreach, but he already seems to be losing old friends without winning new ones. He once had approval ratings of more than 80 per cent, but now he is ranking at minus-66. Eleven million watched his Oprah interview in the UK; last Sunday, he pulled just over four million.

There is one very obvious misunderstanding here. Harry has a simple equation in his head: newspapers = bad. This conviction led him to sell his story to a book publisher. But books are not necessarily safer or classier than newspapers. The same commercial imperatives drive both. Much of the two sectors is even owned by the same people.

Somehow he has allowed himself to be lulled, coaxed, incentivised or manipulated into revealing salacious and sensational things about his younger days. That kind of truth-telling is superfluous to his stated aims, and it is difficult to explain such revelations unless someone somewhere wanted to boost sales of the book with its self-proclaimed 'raw, unflinching honesty'. Those he took for sheep might have turned out to be wolves in a book jacket's clothing.

We now know his side of the story, but by making him more famous, his book has also made him less private. Some of his confessions are already proving damaging and can only create a demand for more such stories. Will he supply them, or will someone else? Where, now, can he be safe from press intrusion?

At present he is surrounded by thick smoke from the many bridges he has burned, and perhaps he is not seeing clearly. But when the smoke lifts, he may find he has walked into a desert with no idea how he got there and no map to get him home. ■

Roderick Matthews is the author of Jinnah vs Gandhi *and* Mountbatten and the Partition of British India

RP - Sanjiv Goenka Group

saregama

THE PERFECT GIFT
FOR YOUR LOVED ONES

ARTISTES
SPECIALS
GEETMALA
LATA MANGESHKAR
LAG JA GALE KE PHIR YE
Saregama
USB / AUX IN
FM / AM
Bluetooth
LEGENDS
ARTISTES
MOODS
GEETMALA
LATA MANGESHKAR
LAG JA GALE KE PHIR YE
LATA MANGESHKAR
LAG JA GALE KI PHIR YEH

SAREGAMA
CARVAAN®

PRE-LOADED EVERGREEN SONGS

OPEN conversation

with RUTH HARRIS

Historian

By KEERTHIK SASIDHARAN

‘Vivekananda Is Unique because He Globalises Hinduism’

Swami Vivekananda (January 12, 1863-July 4, 1902) emerges onto Indian history like a golden fire—an Agni beset upon the despair-filled forests of late 19th-century India. So incandescent was his presence that nearly 120 years after it ceased to burnish in person the world of religious thought, a careful observer can still glean much from his dimming but luminous halo. But Vivekananda was also a man, a teacher, a member of a colonised society, who was born into a particular moment of Indian history with its own social dynamics, vocabularies of self-understanding, and imaginaries about horizons to aspire for. Historian and academic Ruth Harris’ new biography, *Guru to the World: The Life and Legacy of Vivekananda* (Belknap Press, 560 pages, ₹799), an imprint of Harvard University Press and imported by HarperCollins, is an

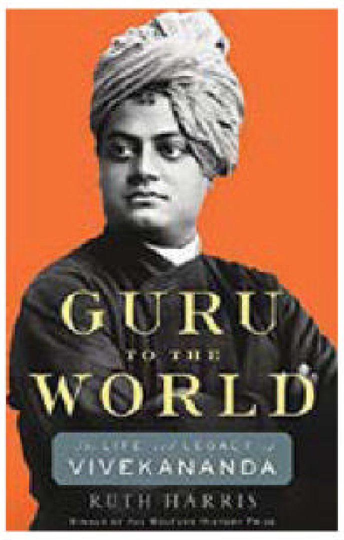
Unlike Gandhi, Vivekananda does not repudiate science, and he does not repudiate technology. He does not repudiate anything that can bring people up

Illustration by **SAURABH SINGH**

effort to excavate the man buried under a century-long mudslide of readings and misreadings. Excerpts from a conversation on Vivekananda, not as a philosopher or theologian but as a life thrown into history.

How must we think of Swami Vivekananda? Is he a 19th-century figure reacting to the first wave of globalisation that arguably began in the 1850s? Is he a 20th-century figure who foreshadowed a revivalist strain in Indian consciousness and has run out of relevance? Or is he a prophetic figure whose speeches and writings will annotate Hindu and religious thought in the decades to come?

The book was premised on the idea that it was about Swami Vivekananda being a late-19th century figure and very much a part of his time. I was trying to understand his life not from our present era, but to place him in the world of the 1893 Parliament, of "mind control", healing, and Orientalism, as well as the emergence of American Pragmatism, Christian Science and theosophy. To understand what it meant, both for him and those who heard him. And it took a lot of historical imagination because it's not only Vivekananda whose persona has been overlain with myth and legend. Western women (who were his friends and acolytes) and people like William James (the American philosopher and psychologist) equally had a cliché-ridden vision of the 'Oriental' and Indian metaphysician. They were surprised by this man who had read what they had read, and who easily engaged with their concerns, while trying to share his own unaccustomed teachings. I felt that this was my job as a historian to understand him both in his Indian world and in his global context, while also connecting the two. I also wanted to say what he said, because I find people attribute things to him that he really didn't say.



Freud was born on May 6, 1856; Vivekananda on January 12, 1863; Gandhi on October 2, 1869; and finally Einstein on March 14, 1879. Can we think of these figures as a cohort? If yes, what sort of underlying currents—or to use Raymond Williams' phrase "the structure of feeling"—were at work by the time Vivekananda appears on the scene?

There was indeed a cohort, and they all sought to encompass relativism within universalism. And these men, including Einstein, were all interested in the ethical ramifications of their thought and believed they were seeking "Truth". And yet, all, also, hoped that this Truth somehow would encompass many truths, and especially the relativism that came out of their experiences, investigations, and experiments. I think that Vivekananda is especially important because he's the one who most often and very early speaks repeatedly about unity and diversity and the possibility of their interchangeability. They are all interested also in the relationship between consciousness and cosmic consciousness. Freud is also interested in the unconscious of the individual and how it links to universal mythologies, as much as he wants to link them both to lower levels of reaction and instinct. And that's certainly true of Jung. All were interested in the interrelations between philosophy, the natural sciences, and spirituality. And it's certainly true of Vivekananda as he deals with ideas emerging about the "unconscious" and then translates the emerging psychological discourse into a discussion about what he called "'superconsciousness". How you deal with what's deeper within individuals and in cultures and then try to go beyond individuals and cultures. They're all preoccupied with these issues.

Arguably, after 1902 when Vivekananda dies, without Sister Nivedita's efforts, perhaps he might have faded away from the emergent Indian middle class' mind. Her reifying of Vivekananda's persona in the public imagination has such a huge part in creating our collective memory of him.

It is for this reason that I include so much about Sister Nivedita, for it is almost impossible for us to separate Vivekananda from her vision of him. One of the problems again is: How do we approach the relationship of his key ideas to his own doubts? And that's the thing. There are so many doubts in him about whether he's taking the right path—which makes part of your question [to come later] about why he so often pulled people to the middle way. What I do find so interesting about Vivekananda is that, like Gandhi, like Freud, they all had very socially conservative views of women. I know less about Einstein, but the others were very disturbed by female sexuality. And that's very evident in their writings. But at the same time they are remarkable for the way they take women seriously. So we have to come to grips with men who hold views of women that we might now find discomfiting but who nonetheless took women very seriously, both as idealisations in their thought but also as practical helpers in their rise and legacy. They can't do it alone. They certainly cannot.

In the West, he called for tolerance of worldviews—that is, asking Protestant Evangelism to see the world and its diversities. And in India, he asked his brother-monks to allow "public women" (sex workers) to worship Ramakrishna as their guru. Here, in a sense, like the Buddha, he spoke different truths to different audiences—all in hopes of improving welfare.

I thought that was an extraordinary insight you had. Mostly when people write about Vivekananda and the Buddha—they have Indological concerns and hence are preoccupied with tracing metaphysical and spiritual connections. But in asking your question about the Buddha, you may be onto something. In addressing different audiences in different ways, he seemed to employ the Buddha's method of skilful speech and to draw people away from extremes.

Upāyakaushala…

That's the first thing. But the second thing is the impact of the middle way of Buddhism in his thinking—it is stronger perhaps than we ever realised. Because of this in the West, he's been seen as a counter-preacher [against Protestant Christianity], against materialism, violence, and fanaticism. But in India, he preached against what he saw as weakness, timidity, and imitation. I would add though that there is an important difference between a counter-preacher and a "skilful speaker". The latter suggests adeptness and compassion and the other adversarial speech. He constantly sought to straddle the two techniques by both encouraging and scolding and, like a 'good' guru, prescribing different disciplines for different people.

We shouldn't pigeonhole him in the category of 'Hindu Revivalism', which only reiterates many clichés. What we should think about Vivekananda is: How do we have different visions of the Universal in our world today?

In Vivekananda's story, nobody is more singular than Ramakrishna Paramahamsa. His mystical ways included excesses, abandonments, ambiguous ideas on sexuality and gender identities, claims that he was menstruating and so on—and amid all this is clearly a profound religiosity unlike any we see. But before we go farther, historically speaking, is Ramakrishna a singular persona in modern Indian religious histories? Or was he merely a spiritual-savant of the kind that appear periodically and attempt to break down every barrier—social, emotional, and cognitive—that there is?

I think it's the latter. For a person who's a novice, like me, to encounter Ramakrishna was remarkable. Many may think of him as strange, but I think he's remarkable. Of course, he's also disturbing because of the stories of his life-defying spiritual trials. And he may even offend contemporary sensibilities. But I would say that Ramakrishna is rare but he is *not* unique. There are other famous Hindu mystics, hence so many who saw him during his trials thought he was like Chaitanya. There are precedents in Hindu tradition to Ramakrishna, even if he crafted his message in his own way. Ramakrishna may seem strange to us today, above all, because of his insistence on being a baby. But the way he became a baby spoke a kind of all-inclusive truth. He emphasised babyhood precisely *because* it was a universal human state—before religion, culture, and hierarchy imposed their transformations and created diversity. This understanding or intuition—whatever you want to call it—was extraordinary. And yet it's integral to many 'Hindu traditions' both in its openness to other paths and in the way it sought to envelop and encompass those traditions.

But Vivekananda is unique because he globalises Hinduism. And whether that's good or bad is open, and remains open, to debate. At the time, of course, the orthodox hated what he was doing—the whole idea that one would engage in the world in the way he suggested was a terrible transgression, especially for a *sannyasin*. He seems at intervals to be almost worldly in the way he institutionalises, and yet his vision was often radical, and its articulation unprecedented.

But then there's a deeper, or harder, question that I have thought about which is not about the external aspects of Ramakrishna and all that he did in the world. It is about the deep and profound love and compassion that Ramakrishna shows towards the world and instructs Vivekananda to see as well. There is that episode about Vivekananda mentioning *kirtan* music having no rhythm but Ramakrishna corrects him, helps him see something deeper, emotional. He says, "What are you saying! There is such feeling of compassion in them—that's why people like them." It is as if he wants to remove from Vivekananda the burden of Reason when he says, "As long as there is reasoning, one cannot attain God. You were reasoning. I didn't like it." This is very far from the world of the Brahmo Samaj or colonial Christianity or middle-class Bengali life. Was this ability to demonstrate the 'radicalism' of love itself—a self-devouring sublimation, if you will—that ultimately brought young Narendranath Dutta (and later Vivekananda) to Ramakrishna?

Yes, absolutely. And I really believe that it's hard as a historian to talk about these passions and relationships and yet it is central to my account. Historians often think such questions are outside their purview—they would say that "love" cannot be the centre of historical enquiry. They might feel that "It's so airy, fairy, it's so touchy, feely." But in talking of Ramakrishna's love for Vivekananda, I am only reiterating what Vivekananda said himself: [paraphrase] "no one loved me like this not even my parents." He constantly remarks how this love changed his life. And you know, you feel the sincerity of this. So there's that. There's also the responsibility. Ramakrishna is a baby and he says, you must take care of me. There is a filial connection that inverts the guru-disciple relationship and confirms it at the same time. Vivekananda came to believe that Brahmoism and its sedate rationality simply could not offer such transcendent experience. Brahmoism also evoked in him a sense of terrible loss—because Indians had to give up so much, including family traditions and images. He acknowledged that without that, without Ramakrishna, he would have been a Brahmo in Kolkata, and he would have been smart (and successful in life). But you know he wanted more than that. He really did. And I do think spiritual ambition plays an important role in his life course. Spiritual ambition is powerful. We must imagine it.

Can we talk briefly about the debates between Vivekananda and William James, the great American psychologist and philosopher of Pragmatism?

The debate with William James is, in my view, very interesting. James does not write the preface for [Vivekananda's] *Raja Yoga*, even though he said he would. But Vivekananda does not think that James "gets" Hinduism. Vivekananda rejected James' notion (written later) that Hinduism is grounded in a "sumptuousity of security", that Hindus can't face reality, that Hindus don't really have the character to deal with darkness because they are looking for transcendental realisation and liberation from the illusion of temporality. Vivekananda is saying the opposite: it is Christians who are deluded because they separate good and bad. And what Vivekananda says is that you have to see God in the Terrible, hence the devotion to Kali, which he keeps slightly veiled in the West. When he talks to his acolytes, he insists that if you have a bowl of milk and there's a cork in it, you need to have the cork to float to the top to be able to distinguish between pollution and purity. But you can't push the "Terrible" into the devil's domain and deny it. He argues that this separation makes Christians [of 19th century America] unrealistic and unable to accept criticism because they deny their own "badness". It's a very extraordinary set of lessons. And although he doesn't make a big fuss about it, it's quite a riposte to James who, if you've read him, is a wonderful and lively thinker.

Reading the book, and now hearing you, and thinking about the emotional turmoil that they experience, it almost feels like your book is a history of the longings of lonely people—refracted through one man's life. But effectively, everybody is alone in different ways. Ramakrishna, the American disciples, Sister Nivedita, Ma Sarada… They are all finding ways to connect to each other, to touch each other, which happens through Vivekananda.

I actually think that is what the book is about, even if the attempts to connect with one another are sporadic and not always satisfying. It's part of this global culture, what Leela Gandhi has called "affective communities". I speak at some length about the disappointments because we all grew up in apparent cosmopolitanism, but the pandemic and the end of globalisation really showed us how wrongheaded we were in our impressions. Globalisation brings as much disruption as it brings connection. That is not to say that I have no conclusions to offer in my book, but I do not think we can tie things up, that we must accept the ratty edges and difficulties. But there's nothing except this open to us. These kinds of attempts to connect, to love and not to love, to become 'frenemies' without violence—that's all we have—because we can't expect more. That's why I am glad that you found the tone of the book "generous". The longing is so important because it contributes to what they create together both intellectually and spiritually.

> What I always wonder is if he hadn't died at 39, would it have been Vivekananda instead of Gandhi? Would Vivekananda's views on Islam change? Would he have reacted like Gandhi to Dalits? Or would it have been something different?

In 1902, when Vivekananda died, was there a sense that his life's work contained something momentous that was to emerge? Or, was he just simply preparing the grounds for Gandhi to emerge in a different form?

Tricky. I mean, what I always wonder is if he hadn't died at 39, would it have been Vivekananda instead of Gandhi? Would Vivekananda's views on Islam change? Would he have reacted like Gandhi to Dalits? Or would it have been something different? And I think, all of this is up in the air. And that's why I think he's such an enticing but also provocative figure because he pointedly raises all these issues. And then we don't see what he does with them. He dies. I do think that he was more committed to universalism and harmony than people realise and that these aspects of his thought have now become effaced. He's a moveable feast—literally—because you can find so much but never pin it all down. And that's both the magic of him but also why he remains disorientating and provocative. There are times when he seems to presage our views and other times when he seems reactionary. He is simply appalled by what he sees as the inherent violence in Western Civilisation. And that's a very Gandhian notion. Except, unlike Gandhi, he does not repudiate science, and he does not repudiate technology. And he does not repudiate anything that can bring people up. These differences are important.

Gandhi famously said, "my life is my message". Vivekananda, in some sense, lived many lifetimes in his four decades of life. If we put aside present-day political fashions that have attached themselves behind the ship of his life, what do you think we should think about more when we think about Vivekananda?

I really think that we shouldn't pigeonhole him in the category of "Hindu Revivalism", which only reiterates many clichés and keeps us at a low level of analysis. What we should think about Vivekananda is: How do we have different visions of the Universal in our world today? That is what he was really grappling with and his attempt to straddle these worlds, hence the constant mention of unity and diversity and the need to "embrace different types of Minds and Methods". Vivekananda raised the question of the relationship between science and religion in new ways. Yet, that is not how people think about him at all. He and Gandhi shared many ideas. Like Gandhi, Vivekananda also spoke against consumerism, on appetites. And yet the difference between Vivekananda and Gandhi was that Gandhi really did try to shut down the appetite. Vivekananda never could. That's why he is hurt by those people who tell him that he is not a holy person, because he continues to smoke and enjoy food. But that's precisely the side of Vivekananda that I appreciate because he was not looking to be a Mahatma. He never thought he was at the same level as Ramakrishna. He never thought he was in the same league as Sarada Devi. These are qualities that I admire. His ambitions were more limited and his humanity publicised. But what would have happened if he'd lived through the Swadeshi movement? That's the mystery here. It is a life that is almost in preparation. ■

Keerthik Sasidharan is the author of The Dharma Forest

RP - Sanjiv Goenka Group
spencer's
TRADE
EXPLORE THE FUTURE
WISDOM
every day
fashion
by
DUKE
STARDUST

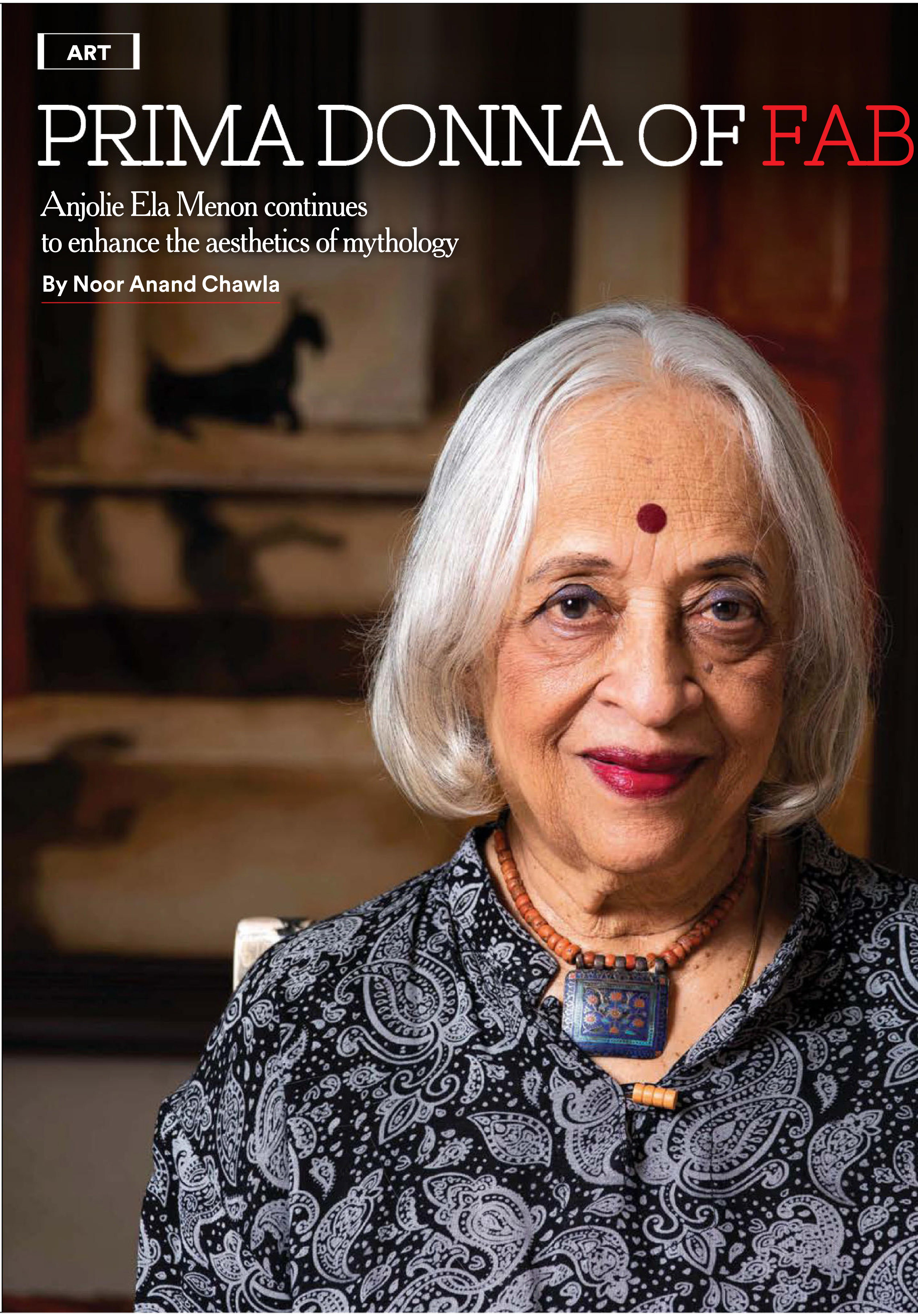
www.spencers.in GET IT ON Google Play Download on the App Store

ART

PRIMA DONNA OF FAB

Anjolie Ela Menon continues to enhance the aesthetics of mythology

By Noor Anand Chawla



ULISM

Artist Anjolie Ela Menon is a true maverick. She has created an artistic language of her own—whether it is her non-conformist views on arts education (she quit her arts course at the Sir JJ School of Art, Mumbai, believing that she was ahead of the curriculum offered to first-year students); her unusual choice of medium (she is a rare Indian artist who paints with oil on Masonite, a hardboard); her unapologetic interpretation of sensitive subjects (evident in her depiction of mythological figures, which challenge norms); or the fact that over a 65-year-long career as an artist, she has practiced her craft daily, while many of her contemporaries gave up.

An ongoing solo exhibition of her works titled, *Nostalgia*, at Vadehra Art Gallery in Delhi, summarises this unique language by showcasing select works—22 of which are recent while 12 are from older collections—from her vast repertoire. Together, these pieces define Menon's art and bear her unmistakable stamp. Though she has dabbled in sculpture, in the past, favouring the use of Murano glass, has made many large-scale murals, as well as digital art works, she is best known for her oil on Masonite works, which she paints in thin layers, slowly building a multi-hued vibrancy that lends her work an almost ethereal effect.

"The biggest challenge for any artist is to create a signature. Once you create a signature, you have established yourself as someone doing original work. Many youngsters just coming out of college are happy to copy other pre-existing genres, as it's very difficult to establish a signature. Often, it's a combination of many factors. The paintings on display at *Nostalgia* are my signature," says Menon, walking us through the exhibit.

The strongest evidence of this is in the showstopper piece displayed front and centre at the gallery. It is a triptych, called *Divine Mothers*, painted within an ornate *jharokha*-style window, and shows Parvati, Mariam and Yashoda, mothers to Ganesh, Jesus and Krishna respectively. Two of the strong matriarchal figures—with the exception of Mary—are depicted with untied hair and in modern clothing, in an attempt to establish their individual personalities. They are, therefore, recognisable mainly through their children, who have been painted as they are often shown in popular mythology. Menon has always been influenced by European iconography. This is evident in her depiction of Mary, with the exception of the colour of her skin and hair, whose darkness is a nod to the biblical character's Arab origins. Framing these striking figures is the intricately carved *jharokha*, which Menon found in a junkyard in Ahmedabad. Its curlicued edges are mimicked by the artist's prominent checkerboard pattern, which connects the three divine figures.

The artist explains the intent behind this work, "I believe my divine mothers are the product of a feminist discussion. I've always felt they should be honoured along with their children. To a certain extent, Mary is worshipped but why leave out the others? Practically speaking, the painting was influenced by the *jharokha*, whose three equal sections had to be filled in. As for the modern interpretation of their garments, it's because I never want any of my paintings to be fixed in time or geography. I prefer for them to have a mythical quality."

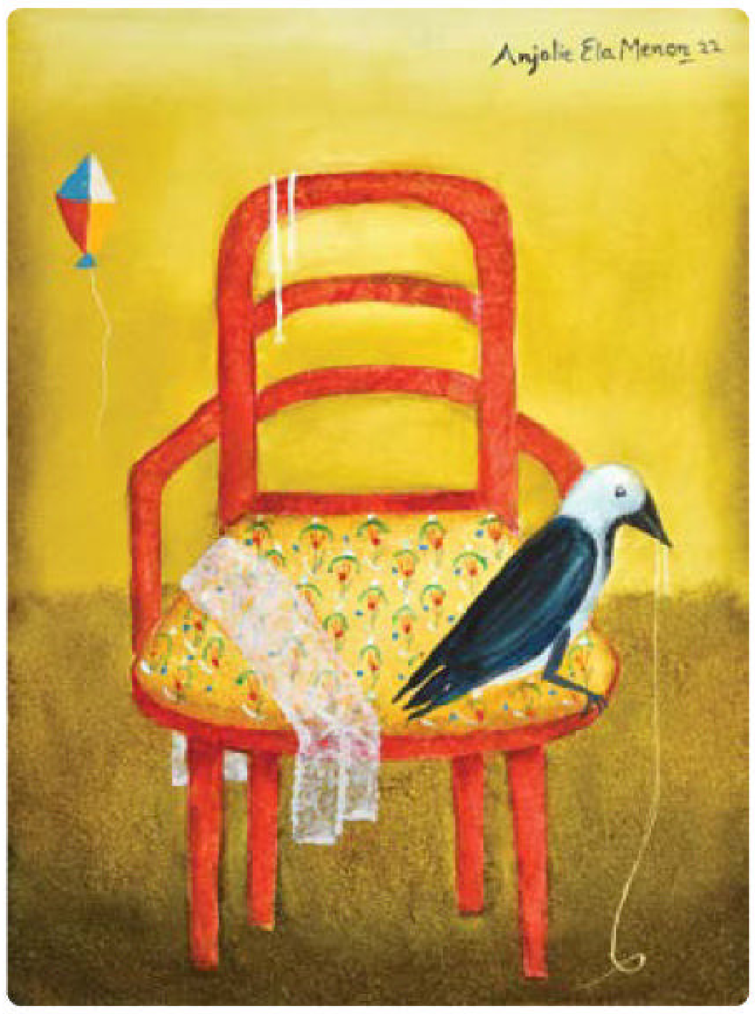
> "I've always found the goats, goatherds and life in the *basti* very fascinating. It's like constant street theatre. People are fighting or celebrating, and I celebrate with them"
>
> Anjolie Ela Menon **artist**

The divine mothers, as the bearers of 'shakti' or the power of creation endowed in Indian goddesses, as well as other Indian mythological figures have been a fixture in Menon's work over the years. Her most recent exhibition in New York too focussed on this theme, and the images persist in *Nostalgia.* A semi-clad Yashoda holds on to her innocent Balagopala, a melancholic *Madonna with Child* is crowned by flying cherubs, and a striking blue *Ganapathi* are some prominent works. These iconic religious symbols, however, only bear an aesthetic appeal for Menon.

She asserts, "I was raised as a Brahmo Samaji and we don't believe in idol worship, but I find both western and Indian mythology a great source of aesthetics. Look at the greatest sculptures of our country in Mahabalipuram, Ajanta, Ellora, etc. These form the basis of all our art, which has been inspired by mythology, and we must honour that. One of the greatest things that religion has done is to promote the arts. Take the example of music, Hindustani classical or Carnatic music is all based on mythology."

Religion—both Indian and Western—has greatly influenced Menon's practice. The fascination began when she attended a course on fresco painting at the prestigious École Nationale Supérieure Des Beaux-Arts in Paris from 1959-61 on a scholarship. During this time, she travelled through Europe to see the great art of the western world. She vividly recalls lying on the floor of obscure churches and cathedrals to admire the intricately painted ceilings.

RED CHAIR
BY ANJOLIE ELA MENON



It is no surprise therefore, that her early work was influenced by Christian art, especially of the Renaissance period. And it was only after her return to India and marriage into a family from Kerala that she began to be influenced by the Indian elements of art. This is the reason she is often compared with Amrita Sher-Gil whose art trajectory was similar to hers. Even though Menon was born in 1940 in Bengal, her mixed American parentage ensured a distinctly western upbringing, further cementing the influence of the west on her art.

"My grandmother brought us up and she was an American from Boston. She infused us with a knowledge of western culture. And my grandfather's family were from the Brahmo Samaj, so I only learnt about Hindu culture after I got married. My husband, Rear Admiral Raja Menon, was posted around India and the world, and I've moved 30 houses after marriage. Each of the places we lived in, and these life changes and influences play out in my paintings. *Nostalgia* is a combination of these early and later influences. I believe all artists metamorphose very slowly from one exhibition to another and this is my 58th one or maybe even more, so a lot of ground has been covered," she says.

This exhibition in particular, was conceptualised to showcase the signature heads, which are synonymous with Menon's practice. Yet, after painting 8-10 of these, she felt the need to expand the offerings and painted a few larger pieces too. Each of the larger works evokes a strong personal memory.

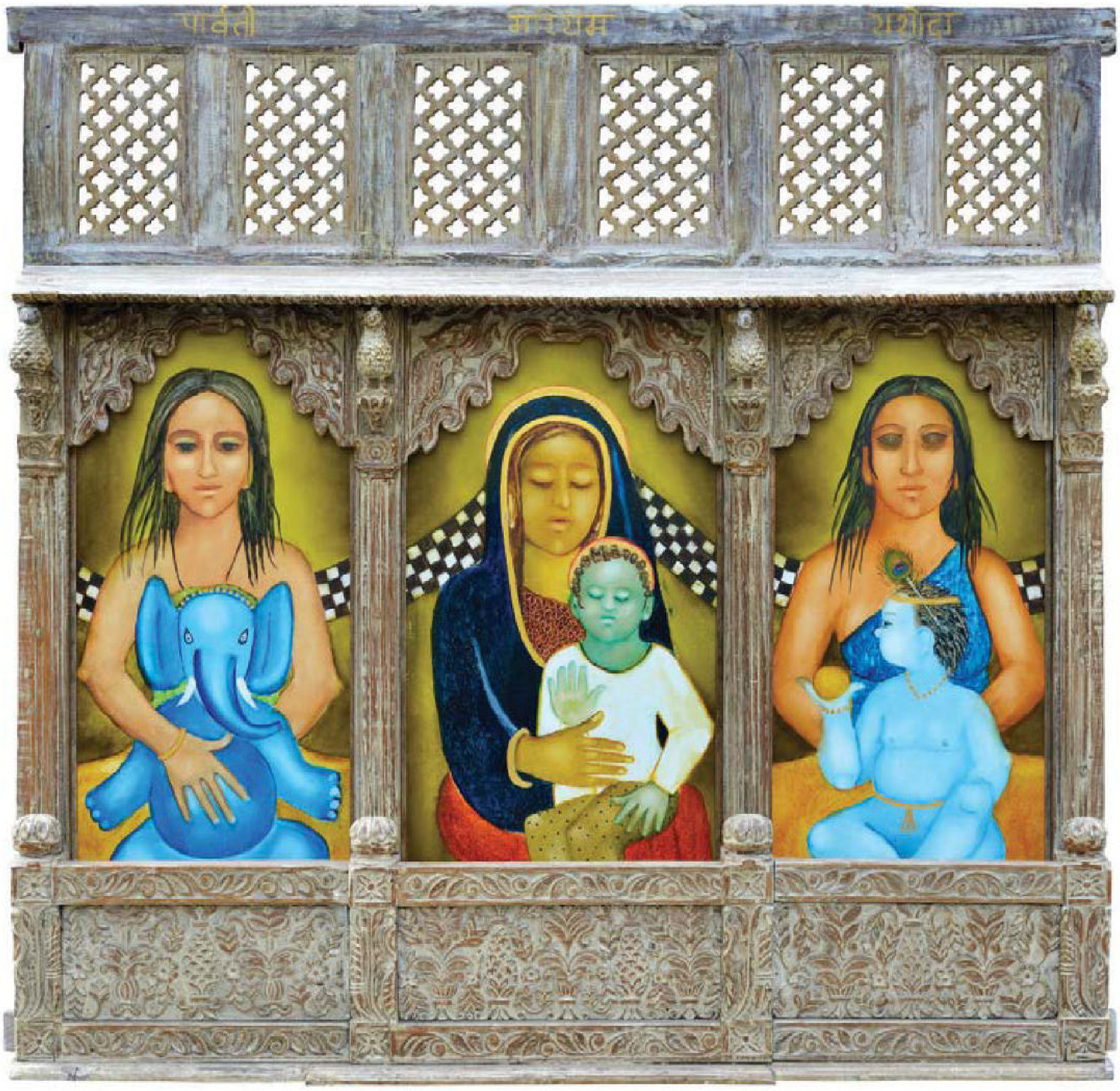
Haveli, like a few of Menon's earlier works, shows the vibrant street life the artist witnesses every day from her studio's window, which looks onto a busy thoroughfare in Delhi's Nizamuddin *basti.* In it, a striking green window is the threshold to a busy world where a female goatherd pauses with her charges for a minute, amidst the chaos of daily life. Menon says, "I've always found the goats, goatherds and life in the *basti* very fascinating. It's like constant street theatre. People are fighting or celebrating, and I celebrate with them."

Another interesting larger work that catches the eye is *Laxmi Sadan*, where a man performs the quotidian act of reading his newspaper and sipping tea, framed by an open window—made in a style characteristic of Mumbai's early 20th century architecture with its liberal use of painted-glass. A pensive parrot looks on to the scene as a voyeur might. Menon likens herself to this parrot, which incidentally is modelled on her own pet bird.

"Laxmi Sadan was our house in Bombay. We were posted there for nine years and that building really influenced me. This was also the period I became fascinated by junk; I would visit the Lakkar Bazaar and Bhendi Bazaar and often saw a similar scene to the one in this painting. These dark interiors would intrigue me and made me wonder what's going on within those walls. I did a whole series on the women of Kamathipura, the famed red-light district of Mumbai, and it showed women leaning out of their windows, hanging their clothes, living their lives in these dark interiors. That curiosity is encapsulated in this painting. I'm a bit of a voyeur who wants to know what's happening within those interiors," she says.

Menon's detailed explanations of her works are akin to stories and the exhibition is a paean to her memories of a creatively satisfying life. She delves into her rich memory bank for the numerous unnamed portraits she creates. These 'heads', as she refers to them, encapsulate a variety of moods, emotions, and personal characteristics that sometimes bear the reflection of people close to her. Though widely distinct in the use of colour, markings and backdrops, a common thread amongst them is the solemnity and dignified bearing of each person. One sees it especially in works like, *Ayesha*, *Namboodiri*, *Vir* and *Dream.*

It is clear that Menon's surroundings



DIVINE MOTHERS BY ANJOLIE ELA MENON

> "I never want any of my paintings to be fixed in time or geography. I prefer for them to have a mythical quality"
>
> **Anjolie Ela Menon**

continue to influence her work. Solitude is a recurrent theme in many pieces and is often characterised by empty, even though vividly painted, furniture set in pretty landscapes or decadent living rooms. These empty seats signify loss or abandonment, with their sole occupant being one or many of her favoured animals including crows, parrots and other birds, as well as cats, dogs, goats and lizards.

Animals have long featured in her work. An older iconic painting, *The Frenchman's House*, perhaps started this trend, which in this exhibition is seen in *Red Chair* and *Khattia*. In the former, an empty emerald-green armchair is placed amidst opulent surroundings, flanked by a statue of the bovine goddess Kamadhenu. A crow looks on as a lizard creeps up a side table placed nearby. Similarly, the two recent works depict a red chair and an Indian rope bed placed in a garden with the same crow perched on them. The only addition is that of a lively kite flying overhead.

Speaking of her love of animals, Menon says, "Our house is like a zoo! We have a cat, dog, parrot, lizards, squirrels, and so much more. The black crow that is a recurring symbol first came into my life in Bombay. It would come to my flat every day and one day he entered my painting and has stayed ever since."

These vivid creatures aren't the only recurring symbols in Menon's work. Another oft-repeated theme is that of mother and child, as well as religious figures like Batushka—the Russian Orthodox priest she observed while visiting a church during her years at Moscow in the 1960s—or *Brahmin Boy*, the solemn young boy being prepared for a religious ceremony.

The artist ends our chat by summarising her practice: "I have always tried to be a karma yogi by making the work most important to me, not the result. Many artists have their eye on the money, that is the enemy of creativity. One requires patience to succeed. Young artists want instant success and that just isn't possible, if it is to be long lasting."

This mantra does explain her success. In 1958 during her first solo exhibition in Delhi under the mentorship of MF Husain, art critic Richard Bartholomew saw into the future, when he said, "I have no doubt that before long this gifted young woman will be joining the ranks of our very best painters." ■

Nostalgia, *by Anjolie Ela Menon, runs at Vadehra Art Gallery, Delhi till January 30*

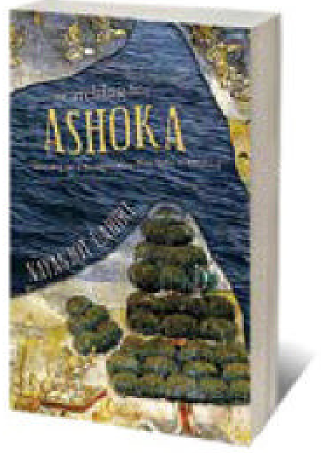
BOOKS

ON THE ASHOKA TRAIL

Nayanjot Lahiri travels through Asia to explore the different images of the Mauryan emperor. The author in conversation with **Ullekh NP**

RAUL IRANI

ASHOKA WAS AN emperor quite unlike any other. For an ancient ruler, he was the antithesis of a conqueror. He admitted as sin what even modern rulers often boast of as a victor's right: show no mercy in a war. We see the mighty West's lack of contrition on the gun-swept streets and the ruins of Baghdad, Damascus and Kabul. If you expose empires the way Julian Assange did, they strike back with extreme bias. Will nuclear-armed democracies in wars ever repent their excesses? We all know the answer. Some countries still refuse to acknowledge their World War crimes, connivance with malefactors, and persecution of civilians based on ethnicities and nationalities. Which is why Ashoka's remorse is the right message bottled and dispatched from another time. Will his change of heart from being an archetypal warmonger to a messenger of peace inspire powerful nations of today or tomorrow? We do not know yet, but therein lies his significance as a metaphor for conversion from violence to non-violence.



What we do know is that the carnage at Kalinga in 261 BCE drastically altered Ashoka and as a result influenced vast areas of what is now the Indian subcontinent and beyond. In hindsight, by displaying guilt he acquired a hero's status from being considered a ruthless king. His tireless efforts to spread Buddhism—within eight years of his coronation as the head of the Mauryan dynasty—and construct stupas and erect inscriptions helped his name endure through the ages. It comes as no surprise that such a reformed ruler was a great attraction for Jawaharlal Nehru, a modern man, moderniser and a liberal. Any current effort by a section of historians to demonise Ashoka even after he became a pacifist following Kalinga therefore needs to be seen in the contemporary political context.

As a historian and archaeologist, Nayanjot Lahiri, too, is obsessed with Ashoka. Her books on him are enough proof of that spell. She is arguably the best historian on Ashoka and the way she narrates his story is as compelling as it is relevant. Interestingly, when she shifted from Delhi University to Ashoka University a few years ago, it seemed symbolic that the biographer of an emperor—who once ruled a kingdom headquartered in modern Bihar—took up the position of a professor of history in an educational institution named after him.

For those familiar with Lahiri's previous work on Ashoka, including her book, *Ashoka in Ancient India* (2015), her latest book *Searching for Ashoka: Questing for a Buddhist King from India to Thailand* (Permanent Black; 260 pages; ₹895) offers new insights about the influence of the ancient emperor, of the multiple Ashokas across geographies and new myths created around him to falsely construct a past linked to him. And yet, Ashoka's commitment to non-violence stands unshaken. For those reading Lahiri for the first time on Ashoka, the new book offers a standalone treat of her academic practice, as well as how Ashoka is remembered by people in India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand and elsewhere.

Searching for Ashoka is part of Lahiri's pursuit, as she explains in the Introduction, "For nearly a millennium and a half ... old legends had grown and new ones had been invented around Ashoka. And they had crept, filtered through, and made their way to distant lands—not just north to Tibet and China, but also east across an ocean. In their wake, six hundred or so years later (after the caricaturing and reinvention of Ashoka in

Thailand), here (Nakhon Si Thammarat in Thailand, home to a Thai variant of Ashoka) I was on their tail, chasing tales."

Lahiri is not shocked at this reinvention. As a historian, she has seen it happen to the ancient Macedonian king Alexander who reappears in medieval Persian texts as a Persian king. There is also the example of Sultan Saladin—who fought against the Crusaders—being later reinvented as a Christian knight. "Human memory is notoriously selective," she states and elaborates using texts in psychology and lessons from history.

Asked why countries like Thailand had to invent a culture around Ashoka, Lahiri tells *Open*, "Thailand has a long archaeological history that has little to do with India, to begin with. Its material connections with South Asia, when they become evident, appear many centuries prior to the presence of either a Buddhist or Ashokan connection. Even later then what is present, you also have the creation over time of Hindu sacred spaces and images. In my book, I draw attention to the fact that while Thai kings in medieval times made Ashoka visible, they did so for their own reasons. In the case of Nakhon Si Thammarat, the local chronicles aim to present themselves as antique and since they are Buddhist, it is the larger

"WHEN NEW MYTHS ARE CREATED FROM OLD ONES THEY HAVE VERY LITTLE TO DO WITH HISTORICAL EMPERORS AND THINKERS AND HAVE A GREAT DEAL TO DO WITH CREATING CULTURAL IDENTITIES"

NAYANJOT LAHIRI author

geography of the Buddha and his relics as also Ashoka that is strongly imagined."

She adds, "This impulse is present across nation states even now. Why, for instance, have statesmen in contemporary India invoked ancient phenomena and persona? This is how new myths are created from old ones and they have very little to do with historical emperors and thinkers and a great deal to do with creating kinds of cultural identities."

This is a book in which Lahiri, in her own words, tries to "show how skilfully and selectively Ashoka was portrayed in later centuries," after his death. About the Thai invention of a piece of history, she notes that Ashoka may well have been annoyed by the "Thai story in which he appears as a supplicant of a medieval ruler in South East Asia." And then she adds, "But given his own ability to recast the past, and given his powers of self-reflection, I doubt that he would have been surprised by the Thai attempt—and now my attempt—to tell a new story about him."

Lahiri, who is known for her highly nuanced, yet eminently readable works on ancient history, has received accolades and awards for her work. *Ashoka in Ancient India* won the John F. Richards prize in 2016. She is also the recipient of the Infosys Prize for her work in archaeology. Her earlier books include *The Archaeology of Indian Trade Routes* (1992), *Finding Forgotten Cities* (2005) and *Archaeology and the Public Purpose: Writings on and by MN Deshpande* (2021). *Archaeology and the Public Purpose* draws a lot from the family archives of the Deshpande clan, and besides being a stellar academic work on the iconic head of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), it was also an appeal to bring back the expert at ASI in place of "file-pushing director generals".

LAHIRI HAS ALSO edited and co-edited other books. In 2018, she came out with what she called a "light-hearted" book, *Time Pieces: A Whistle-Stop Tour of Ancient India*. She peppered the 10 chapters of the book with anecdotes from politics and literature, world history and music, which are subjects right up her alley.

In this book, she covers several locations in search of Ashoka, including Sanchi (Madhya Pradesh), Kanaganahalli (Karnataka), Junagadh (Gujarat), Barabar (Bihar), besides sites in Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand.

> "ASHOKA, TOO, LIKE RAM (AND GANDHI HIMSELF), HAD QUALITIES WORTHY OF EMULATION BUT ALSO A DARK SIDE"
>
> **NAYANJOT LAHIRI**

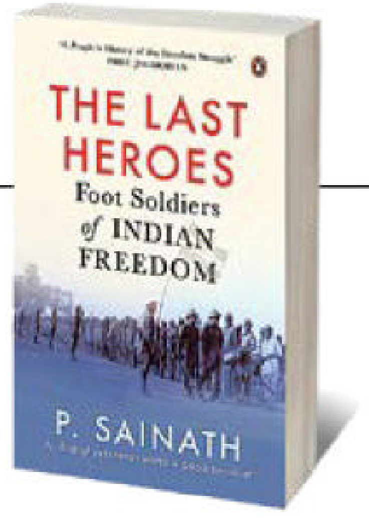
While her first book on Ashoka was on his life and time, she also had a clear glimpse, while researching that work, of how memories of him had shaped over time. This helped enormously in the making of this book. She explains, "I then decided to combine this aspect (how memories evolved) with the fun and feel of his forms in Thailand, Myanmar and Sri Lanka."

Meticulously chaptered, Lahiri starts the book with her travels to Thailand and then looks back at her journeys and discoveries elsewhere mentioned in the book. What appears to be the gist of the book, for those who try to understand Lahiri's fondness for Ashoka as a historical figure, is in the last chapter titled, 'Fabricating Remembrance': "If you look, as I have tried to do in this book, at how a variety of rulers and institutions harnessed Ashoka and reconstructed his image in relation to their own political and religious aspirations, an ancient artificer, a medieval chronicler, and a modern prime minister appear in the same mould."

I ask her after reading the book about why Mahatma Gandhi never talked of an Ashoka Rajya and instead talked about Ram Rajya. The logic is that after all, it is Ashoka who expressed his guilt, respected women's rights and apparently upheld virtues of life much more than Ram did. She says, "There can be many reasons. For one, Gandhi had an intimate familiarity with the Ramayana in a way that he evidently did not with the messages of Ashoka. It was part of his upbringing. The family deity of the Gandhis was Ram, and his mother was a Vaishnavite. It was a text to which he was deeply attached. He read it during his jail sojourns in India, along with the Gita, Koran, and many others. Gandhi's attachment to the epic was such that he asked others to read it—his own son, Harilal, was asked by his father to 'make it a regular practice to read Tulsidas's Ramayana' (I base this on Ramachandra Guha's *Gandhi Before India*). For another, the conquest of evil characters by the good guys that is central to the Rama Katha may have appealed to Gandhi who was fighting the British. Having said that, though, the analogy should not be pushed too far because it was war and violence, which defeated the enemy in the Ramayana whereas in the case of Gandhi, the path that he chose for fighting the British was that of non-violent resistance."

Lahiri adds, "Ashoka, too, like Ram (and Gandhi himself), had qualities worthy of emulation but also a dark side. That was one that Ashoka himself inadvertently revealed—in the way Kalinga, for instance, is described where he sees himself as the perpetrator of colossal carnage. The way Gandhi crafted his philosophy, as also his action plan, reveals an originality, one that is not especially beholden to either Ram or any ancient figure."

Lahiri's *Searching for Ashoka* is a constant reminder to readers about how public perceptions are formed from memories, often deliberately distorted and appropriated, in different times and places. This work also must be seen as an acclaimed and shrewd historian's warning about the way public opinions about personalities are going to be shaped in this age when the dissemination of information and disinformation takes place at a much faster pace than ever before in the past. ■



THE LAST HEROES FOOT SOLDIERS OF INDIAN FREEDOM
P Sainath

Viking
256 Pages | ₹499

Saluting the Foot Soldiers

The freedom movement's nameless legion

By Rajshree Chandra

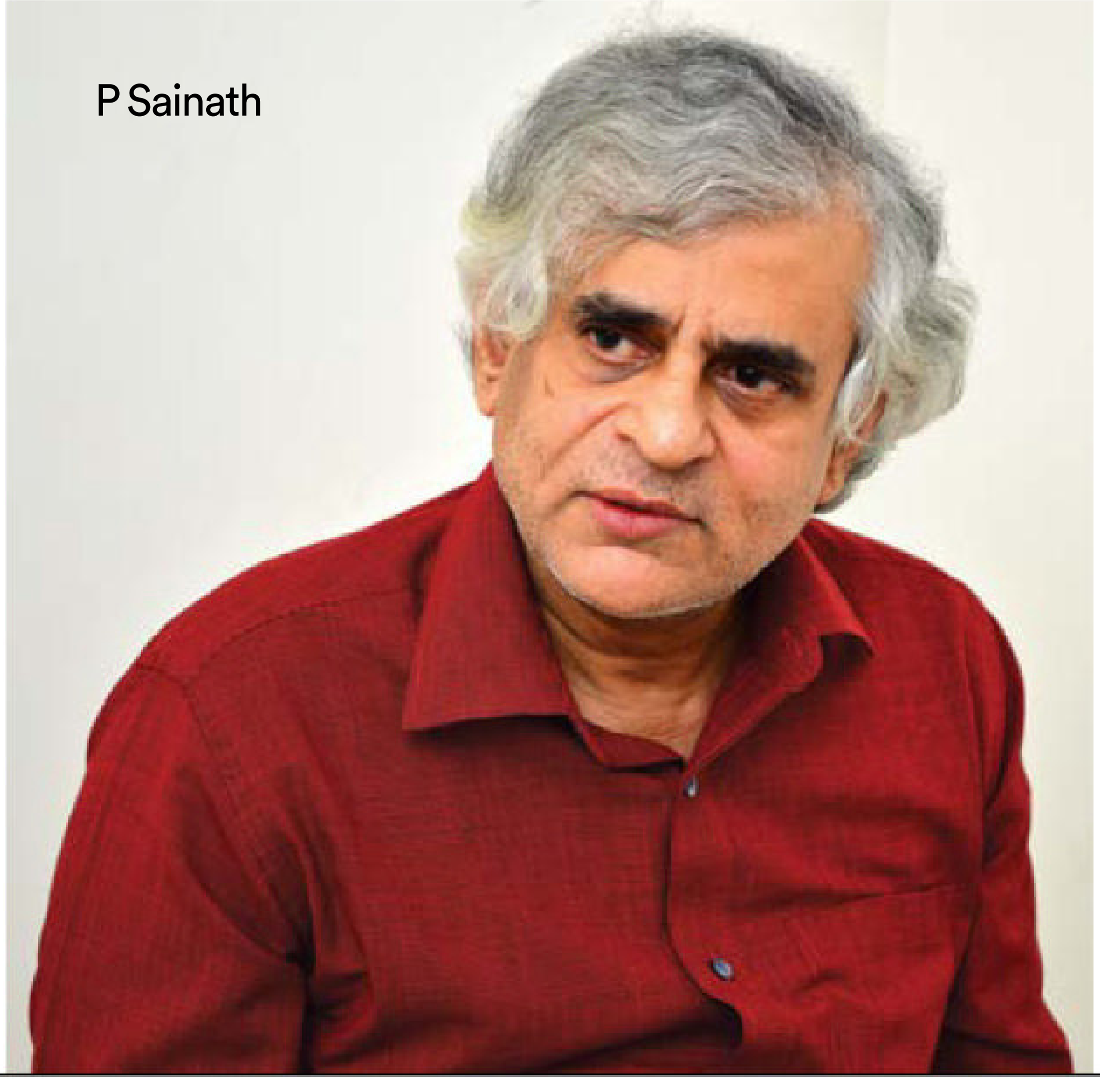
THIS BOOK IS A testament and a tribute to the many unwritten, anonymous, forgotten freedom fighters. It's an act of remembrance, of memorialisation, an installation perhaps that hopes to find display-space in the collective memory of Indians. P Sainath sensitively narrates tales of ordinary people—Dalits, tribals, peasants, ordinary men and women who had so little and yet who gave much of themselves to the cause of India's freedom. Ordinary people with extraordinary courage. These are stories, Sainath reminds us, we need to commemorate in the 75th year of India's Independence.

Hausabai Patil was a member of the Toofan Sena and a revolutionary who attacked British trains, police armouries, dak bungalows. Shobharam, a Dalit from Ajmer (sheltered by none other than Prithviraj Kapoor in Bombay) who didn't want to choose between Gandhi and Ambedkar. Ramchandra Sripati Lad or 'Bhau' who led the attack on the Pune Miraj train that was carrying salaries of British Raj officials. Baidyanath Mahato, a backward-caste Kurmi, who participated in the Quit India movement. There are 16 such stories in the book but the aim of these stories is larger. It is to draw attention to the million other marginalised stories of courage and patriotism. Quoting from a 1914 speech of Gandhi's, Sainath writes: "These men and women ... are the salt of India; on them will be built the nation that is to be. We are poor mortals in front of these heroes and heroines."

The book succeeds at three levels. First, at the most obvious: it's an intervention and a corrective to what has essentially been an elitist, *savarna* telling of the freedom movement. The book challenges this as the sole narrative by making visible newer actors and agents. A second and perhaps even more important part is the story of not just *who else* participated in the freedom struggle, but *what* did they participate and struggle for? In other words, what did they seek to achieve? Captain Bhau (leader of the Toofan Sena Kundal, Sangli, Maharashtra) profoundly said: both independence, and freedom. The book deftly tells the story of "dual exploitation"—feudal and colonial—and the layered and innovative ways in which these men and women were able to evolve a counter narrative and strategy against both structures of power. Mallu Swarajyam, a participant in the Telangana movement, for example valiantly fought against the Nizam's *razakars*, forced and unpaid labour, as well as the British. "We attacked slavery of many kinds." Chamru Parida and fellow Dalits, in another example, were inspired by Gandhi to defy norms of untouchability and also confronted the Raj through acts of civil disobedience. Just like the structures of power are symbiotically linked, so also are the struggles for freedom and independence—lived, experienced and opposed at multiple, inter-sectional levels.

At a third level, the book poignantly reflects on the contemporary location of these freedom fighters in Independent India. Bhagat Singh Jhuggian wants us to know he doesn't like the state of the nation for whose freedom he fought. "None of the people running the country," he says, "hold any legacy of the freedom movement. Not a single one of them. They will destroy this country if not checked." Salihan lives in degrading poverty in Bargarh district of Odisha, dominated by feudal elements who were collaborators of the Raj. "They have benefitted more from the freedom that Salihan and her kind fought for. Islands of wealth dominate the ocean of deprivation here." Nothing summarises it better than Captain Bhau's statement: "We fought for two things—for freedom and independence. We gained independence."

Memorialisation is a process that honours those who suffered or died or displayed extraordinary courage during a conflict. It can also, like *The Last Heroes*, play a decisive role in fashioning collective identity, and in the retrieval and validation of marginalised people and their invisibilised histories. The book's ambition, in a larger sense, is to foster not just a historical recovery, but a social recovery as well. ■



P Sainath

A NEW REEL

AS THE STRUCTURE OF STATE SUPPORT FOR FILMS GETS DISMANTLED, THE INDUSTRY STANDS DIVIDED

By Kaveree Bamzai

Illustration by **SAURABH SINGH**

It was approved in 2020 and put into effect in March 2022, but when the axe finally fell on Films Division, National Film Archive of India and the Directorate of Film Festivals on December 31, there was widespread horror from filmmakers and academics. "A black day," is how director Anurag Kashyap described it. "Distressing," chimed in actor-director Nandita Das. But could the merger of Films Division (FD), National Film Archive of India (NFAI), Directorate of Film Festivals (DFF) and Children's Film Society of India (CFSI) with the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC) actually be a product of the times?

Veteran filmmaker Shyam Benegal seems to think so, saying we can't expect 19th-century methods for cinema of the 21st century. The Films Division was set up in 1948, a colonial legacy of the King and Empire; the National Film Archive of India was set up in 1964 and the Directorate of Film Festivals was established in 1973. All of them, and the CFSI, set up in 1955, have been subsumed under the umbrella of NFDC.

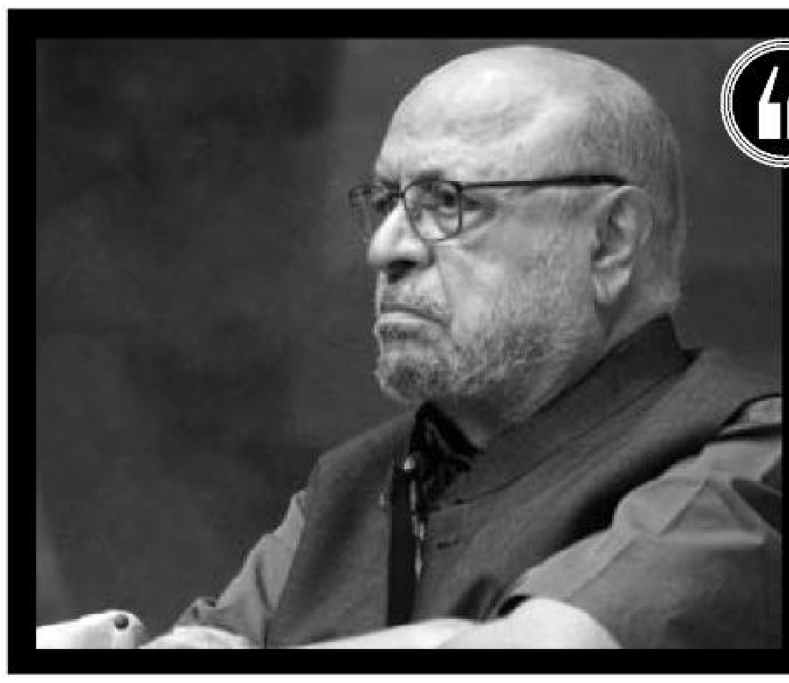
Not a moment too soon, feel members of the Bimal Julka committee tasked with restructuring the visual units of the Ministry for Information and Broadcasting. In its report, the committee headed by the former Central Information Commissioner found overlapping activities undertaken by multiple institutes and suggested an umbrella configuration with four broad verticals under which institutes should work—production, festival, heritage and knowledge. These verticals would be headed by professionals, said the report. Filmmaker Rahul Rawail, who was a member of the committee, says this doesn't mean the state is withdrawing support to cinema, it is merely ensuring the end of duplication of work, wastage of money and even "not very clean practices".

Amplifying this, a source within the Information and Broadcasting Ministry says, each institution intended to safeguard and promote India's cinematic heritage had its own bureaucracy, its own fiefdom, its supplicants, its granting and withdrawal of patronage, and its hidden inefficiencies—NFAI, for instance, started digitisation of its archives only as late as 2008. In one fell swoop, these have been removed and subsumed under NFDC, which will now handle all film-related work, including that of film festivals, film awards, children's films, and film archives. Easier to manage, and easier to control.

These are all political projects, just as cinema is. As far back as in 1951, the Film Enquiry Committee, set up by the Ministry, suggested means to develop the film industry as "an effective instrument for the promotion of national culture, education and healthy entertainment" and blamed the government for ignoring its "nation-building role" and allowing it to fall into the hands of "unqualified, ill-equipped individuals," an industry which actually required "skilful and trained direction men with vision and ideas." It is no accident that Indian cinema scripted a post-colonial national narrative that followed the Nehruvian vision, though the first prime minister was always ambivalent about cinema.

Every government has tried to use cinema as propaganda, and whether it is the choice of whom to give film awards to, or which movies to screen at film festivals, or which films to restore will always be a political act in a country where the state support for cinema still matters. The difference with this establishment is that it does not accord cinema the primacy that was previously bestowed on it. Post-liberalisation, when the NDA government gave industry status to Mumbai cinema, it acknowledged the importance of Bollywood's presentation of India to the world as an emerging superpower, with a vast middle class and prosperous NRIs, unlike the rooted stories of the NFDC-sponsored cinema between 1960 and 1980. Now, however, the establishment wants to be India's sole storyteller, and thanks to changes in technology—with streaming and phone-generated YouTube content becoming more pervasive—cinema as a whole is being marginalised.

In such an environment the Information and Broadcasting Ministry, with its comparatively limited budget of ₹3,980 crore, itself has very little of its original agenda. The Prasar Bharati CEO now wields financial powers, and the focus is shifting to broadcasting policy, monitoring of telecasts and ensuring broadcast compliance, managing government advertising and handling outreach for the government, which is also being devolved to individual ministries.



> **"YOU CAN'T USE 19TH-CENTURY METHODS FOR 21ST-CENTURY TECHNOLOGY. THE REQUIREMENTS OF TODAY ARE DIFFERENT. YOU NEED CONSTANT RETHINKING"**
>
> **SHYAM BENEGAL** filmmaker

But as Das has pointed out, historically, each subsumed organisation's role in expanding and preserving Indian cinema at large was crucial. The aim of NFDC was to fund diverse independent cinema in various Indian languages, often the ones that mainstream corporations do not fund. Its role has been diminishing for years and there was in fact an urgent need to revive it. While we need to improve the quality and scope of documentaries made under the Films Division, its role was significant in documenting realities that were being ignored. The NFAI played a very important role in archiving a rich film tradition in India. Such works have been preserved for posterity, which is of immense historical and technical value for generations to come. The DFF has been an important body that has both brought world cinema to Indian audiences in affordable ways, and also showcased Indian cinema to the world.

> THIS MERGER IS A STEP TOWARDS MAKING CINEMA IN INDIA LESS ACCESSIBLE AND AUTONOMOUS. FURTHER, THE PROCESS BY WHICH SUCH A DECISION HAS BEEN ARRIVED AT IS UNDEMOCRATIC
>
> **NANDITA DAS**
> filmmaker

Sudha Tiwari, assistant professor at UPES, Dehradun, says the merger is technically unsound. "It will overload the NFDC. Thanks to suggestions of mergers of 'defunct' film bodies like FD, and FTII with the NFDC in the 1990s, independent filmmaking in India has suffered the most, with funding diverted towards developmental areas, and profit-making sectors rather than pursuing independent filmmaking by young filmmakers, who want to experiment with the medium of cinema. The need of the hour, in the OTT-fied and digital times in Indian cinema, was in fact to give more financial support to FD, NFAI, and CFSI, than merging them with NFDC. With this merger, it is the archival sources and documentation of Indian cinema that will suffer the most. The government has also not disclosed its full plan. It did not keep the Indian film industry and various stakeholders in the loop before taking such a major decision, with far reaching consequences. It was abruptly done, and there is quite a bit of dissent on this decision among filmmakers, and film scholars," she says.

The Ministry reorganisation is a work in progress. Little of its original agenda remains. In the broadcasting wing, with the Prasar Bharati CEO now wielding financial powers, the focus has shifted to broadcasting policy, monitoring of telecasts and ensuring broadcast compliance, managing government advertising and handling outreach for the government, which is also increasingly being devolved to individual ministries. The films wing of the Information and Broadcasting wing also oversees the Central Board of Film Certification, set up in 1952, whose appellate body has been scrapped, and the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune, as well as the Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute of India, Kolkata, which the government is steering clear of, for now. As for the information wing of the ministry, the erstwhile media units of Directorate of Advertising and Visual Publicity, Directorate of Field Publicity and Song & Drama Division were merged in 2017 to create the Bureau of Outreach and Communication, even as other organisations such as Publications Division, Indian Institute of Mass Communication, Registrar of Newspapers for India and Press Information Bureau continue.

Benegal, who has made films for NFDC including the upcoming *Mujib: The Making of a Nation* as a co-production with the Bangladesh Government, says the downsizing is a function of getting the economics right, which is a function of assessing how much work each organisation had. "Technology is changing fast, rendering old methods redundant. The functions for which certain organisations were set up may no longer be viable. Should NFDC make films or ensure that what it has is better distributed at a time cinemas are closing down and streaming services are booming?" he asks. In any case, he adds, the less one depends on the government, the more room one has to manoeuvre creatively. Benegal should know. He experimented with corporate financing of movies as early as 1974 with *Ankur* and then a year later with *Nishant*, his first and second films, which he financed from Blaze Film Enterprises, run by his friends Mohan Bijlani and Freni Variava.

Both FFC and NFDC have played a vital role in the emergence of the independent cinema of today, with FFC having financing everything from Satyajit Ray's *Charulata* (1964) to Mrinal Sen's *Bhuvan Shome* (1969) to MS Sathyu's *Garm Hava* (1973), and NFDC having supported movies such as Govind Nihalani's *Party* in 1984 to *Salaam Bombay!* by Mira Nair in 1988. The FD has produced at least 5,200 documentaries and over 2,500 newsreels. The Children's Film Society of India has enabled brilliant filmmakers such as Sai Paranjpye and Vishal Bhardwaj to make films, but since 2018, it has not had a chief.

Will the restructured NFDC, headed by Ravinder Bhakar, a Railway Services bureaucrat, who is also CEO of CBFC, resolve these problems? Only time will tell. ■

The Struggle against Forgetting

Trial By Fire
Cast: **Abhay Deol, Rajshri Deshpande**
Creator: **Prashant Nair**
Hindi
Netflix

Abhay Deol and Rajshri Deshpande in *Trial by Fire*

“In a few years they will be gone,” says Abhay Deol, playing Shekhar Krishnamoorthy in the series *Trial by Fire*. He’s chuckling as his wife complains about their children Unnati and Ujjwal. They are in their teens, and indeed, they will be off for studies and work soon enough. But in what is every parent’s worst nightmare, it happens sooner than expected. A fire engulfs the cinema hall they’ve gone to and they become numbers in a list of 59 people who lose their lives that day in Delhi. The year is 1997, it is India’s 50th year as an independent nation, and everyone seems to have more important things to do than follow what came to be known as the Uphaar Cinema fire tragedy. But for the Krishnamoorthys, their lives change forever. For Neelam (played with a resigned resilience by Rajshri Deshpande) and Shekhar, every day is a struggle against forgetting. While Neelam invests all her energy into ensuring the culprits, the Ansals, who built the hall, are brought to justice, Shekhar focuses on building the Association of the Victims of the Uphaar Tragedy. Neelam’s drive is beautifully captured by Deshpande, while Deol’s Shekhar tries hard to live a normal life. Prashant Nair has kept a non-linear narrative that introduces the survivors of the tragedy over time. The cinema hall is supposed to be a safe space, enclosed by the unspoken trust between the theatre owner and the audience that for a few hours they will forget their worries. That trust was broken that day.

Why watch it:
It is not wishy washy as it chronicles the parents’ fight against powerful forces

A Steely Glint and a Gory Murder

HIT: The Second Case
Cast: **Adivi Sesh, Meenakshi Chaudhary**
Director: **Sailesh Kolanu**
Telugu
Prime Video

Adivi Sesh has the kind of squint that stars are born with. The actor who made a nationwide impact with the gripping *Major* (2022), is the star of this crime thriller that features dismembered bodies and a possible serial killer. Along with an engaging romantic storyline, Sesh keeps the pot boiling in *HIT: The Second Case* by following every lead, which eventually leads to a dead-end until it doesn’t.

Meenakshi Chaudhary and Adivi Sesh in *HIT: The Second Case*

Why watch it:
For Sesh, a star waiting to explode

In Case You Missed It

Mumbai Mafia: Police vs The Underworld
Directors: Francis Longhurst and Raaghav Dar
English
Netflix

With an all star cast of encounter specialists like Pradeep Sharma, mafia expert Hussain Zaidi, lesser known names like former D Company member Shyam Kishore who was incognito for over a decade, the obligatory foreign correspondent in *Time* magazine’s former India correspondent Alex Perry and an exceedingly animated journalist Minty Tejpal, *Mumbai Mafia* makes for absorbing viewing even if you’ve been bred on Ram Gopal Varma movies. A potted history of the familiar rise of Mumbai police officers who were once lauded for killing gangsters with no questions asked, celebrated in many Bollywood films, it still manages to thrill with documentary footage of the shoot-out at Lokhandwala, with Sharma saying, “naturally, they (the mafia) are filth, we have to clean them from our society”, and two shots of one-time encounter specialist Sachin Vaze, arrested much later for his role in the Antilia bomb scare. ■

Why watch it:
For a refresher course on the bloody history of Mumbai’s streets

STARGAZER

KAVEREE BAMZAI

JEETHU JOSEPH
HRITHIK ROSHAN
ADITYA ROY KAPUR

➲ No More Small Films?

The end of the small, intimate, dramatic direct-to-digital Hindi film is near. With theatres hoping for big movies making big money, streaming platforms are placing their bets on long-form storytelling to maximise investment. That will have implications not only for male actors starring in mid-budget dramas but also women-oriented shows. Streaming platforms would rather invest in series which give them a lot more viewership and the possibility of a franchise than a two-hour movie. This has caused many producers who were earlier propelling the indie film boom to pivot to regional movies made for theatrical release and shows. Siddharth Anand Kumar, vice president of Films & Events, Saregama India Limited, is one such producer who has quickly focused on regional films and Hindi series. They are betting big on Malayalam movies with their individualistic creators, more cinema-literate audiences, and cost-efficient stars who cost a fraction of the promotion budget needed for Bollywood promotions. Yoodlee Films has already produced *Padavettu*, starring Nivin Pauly; *Kaapa*, with the great Prithviraj; and will release *Kasargold* in March with Asif Ali, directed by Mridul Nair. Ali just did *Kooman* with Jeethu Joseph. "Jeethu Joseph is a great example of why Malayalam films are so nimble-footed. He has just come off two enormous hits, *Drishyam* (2013) and *Drishyam 2* (2021), he still chose to do a small film like *Kooman* rather than go bigger," says Kumar, noting that Mumbai cinema has become too big to get a sense of the zeitgeist now. There are changes coming in the way streaming platforms will deal with series as well, he says. Platforms will not allow producers to keep the copyright, they will want more episodes and they will rationalise budgets. Will they also start making interventions in the shows, as corporates do with TV shows? Till things become clearer, Kumar is quite happy to discover our own backyard as audiences move towards originality and rootedness. In Hindi series, Saregama is producing an action series with Suniel Shetty called *Hunter* as well as a sitcom with Sunil Grover. These are two genres he believes are underserved in the web series space.

➲ Stars and Starry Costs

Filmmaking is an odd business, with possibly the longest lead time for any consumable product. Yet it's most affected by human emotions and its leaders are the male actors, not the men in suits. The actors decide on the story, their costs, their backend deals, even their female co-stars. The bigger the male star the more difficult it is to be objective about their stardom. Hrithik Roshan admitted to this most recently in an interview where he said the job of a star is "unhealthy". Indeed, it comes with a responsibility which increasingly social media is making actors aware of as well, often in unpleasant ways, forcing them to be more careful of what they say and do, on and off screen. Are there lessons male stars from Mumbai cinema can learn from their contemporaries or seniors in other industries? One could be the way Mohanlal allowed himself to be directed by Prithviraj in the *Lucifer* series. Or the way Kamal Haasan presided over Lokesh Kanagaraj's creation of a cinematic universe with Fahadh Faasil and Suriya in *Vikram*. The coming together of Shah Rukh Khan and Salman Khan in the first of what Yash Raj Films has called the YRF Spy Universe, where *Pathaan* will see a cameo by Tiger and *Tiger 3* will see a cameo by Pathaan, may well be the beginning of such collaborations. But the stars also have to rationalise costs in an industry where it costs upwards of ₹40 crore just to market a big Bollywood movie across India. Add to it the costs of the entourages and you have unsustainable budgets which sink even the best movies. Even Karan Johar, no doubt wearing his producer's hat, said recently that delusion is one disease that has no vaccine. "I might be murdered for saying this, but if you are opening to ₹5 crore and you're asking me for ₹20 crore, how is that fair?" he asked. The solution—either create more stars, which means investment of a lot of time and money, or write better stories, where stars don't matter so much.

➲ Scene and Heard

Disney+Hotstar is getting ready to release the Hindi adaptation of BBC One's hit 2016 series *The Night Manager*, with Aditya Roy Kapur and Anil Kapoor playing the roles of Tom Hiddleston and Hugh Laurie respectively. It makes one wonder what it would have been like if Hrithik Roshan, who was considering it for the longest time, had joined the cast. ■

FORTUNE
INDIA

THE
BUDGET
ISSUE

This issue will cover the key announcements of the Union Budget on February 1.
It will also have specialists-tax experts, economists, corporates & politicians-
responding to questions raised on the Budget by Fortune India. In addition we will have
macro stories on economy, infrastructure, manufacturing, jobs, agriculture, SMEs, etc.

ON STANDS FEBRUARY 2023

For business queries, contact:
Arun Singh - Business Head; Mobile: 9818164448
E-mail: arun.singh@fortuneindia.com

fortuneindia.com /fortuneind @FortuneIndia /company/fortune-india fortune.india

RP - Sanjiv Goenka
Group

HELLO!
INDIA ART AWARDS

The second edition of India's most definitive awards in the art world that will honour every domain of artistic excellence.

SUNDAY, *February* 5, 2023

VENUE - 1 AQ DELHI

BY INVITE ONLY

IN CONSULTATION WITH:
SHRINE EMPIRE

For Associations

Kapil Kapoor: kapil.kapoor@hello-india.co.in
Pooja Sharma: pooja.sharma@hello-india.co.in
Arun Vasudevan: arun.vasudevan@hello-india.co.in